

The Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum Celebrates Texas Country Music

Gary Hartman



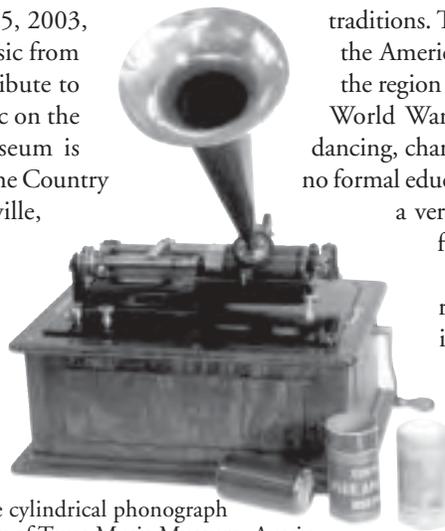
Since it opened in April 2001, the Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum has hosted a variety of exhibits and educational events designed to promote the understanding of the Lone Star State's unique and complex history. The impressive four-story museum, located at the corner of Congress Avenue and Martin Luther King, Jr., Boulevard in Austin, includes 34,000 square feet of exhibit space, along with a 200-seat "Spirit of Texas" performance theater and a 400-seat IMAX theater. Although individual exhibit areas emphasize particular themes in Texas history, the collective focus of the museum is on telling "the Story of Texas" by celebrating the richly diverse traditions of the state and the many people who have made it their home over the past several centuries.

The author would like to thank Pat Jasper, guest curator of the "Country Music from the Lone Star State" exhibit, for assistance with this article.

From September 28, 2002, until January 5, 2003, the Bullock Museum features “Country Music from the Lone Star State,” an exhibit that pays tribute to the important impact of Texas country music on the state and on the world. The Bullock Museum is presenting this exhibit in collaboration with the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in Nashville, the Texas State History Museum Foundation, the Center for Texas Music History at Southwest Texas State University, the Texas Music Office, KLRU/Austin City Limits, the Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin, and others.

Organized into twelve interconnected display areas, the exhibit provides an overview of the evolution of country music in Texas from the early nineteenth century to the present. In addition to the exhibit, the Museum has arranged a series of special afternoon and evening programs, in which prominent scholars, musicians, and members of the music community will perform and discuss the history of Texas country music.

Although it is sometimes under-appreciated as a medium of cultural and historical expression, music has played a vital role in helping all ethnic communities articulate their beliefs, values, and



Vintage cylindrical phonograph courtesy of Texas Music Museum, Austin.

traditions. This has been especially the case throughout the American Southwest, since most ethnic groups in the region had relatively low rates of literacy until after World War II. Music, which could include singing, dancing, chanting, and a variety of other forms, required no formal education or training. Consequently, it served as a very “democratic” form of cultural expression for most individuals and communities.

Beginning with Native Americans in the region, music has always played a central role in the lives of Texans. For most people, music was, and still is, an important part of nearly every aspect of daily life, including work, play, birth, death, courtship, marriage, child rearing, religious worship, patriotic celebration, and countless other activities. Music also has served as an important means of communicating

information and ideas from one generation to the next and from one ethnic group to another. In fact, part of what makes Texas music so unique and vibrant is the “cross-pollination” of different ethnic musical styles, including blues, gospel, conjunto, cajun, polka, country, jazz, and others, as they have mixed and mingled together over the years. Because of unique ethnic, as well as geographic, economic, cultural, political, and economic factors, Texas music, including country music, has developed a distinct sound, different in many ways from the music of other regions.

Whether it is used to help express ideas, information, culture, history, or, simply as a means for having fun, music has long permeated all aspects of Texans’ lives. It is clear that the true “Story of Texas” cannot be fully told without discussing the music that has played such a vital role in the historical and cultural development of the state and region. The “Country Music from the Lone Star State” exhibit highlights these historical roots of Texas country music. With an emphasis on the important contributions made by men and women of all ethnic and social backgrounds, the Bullock exhibit celebrates the uniqueness of Texas music and the impact it has had on shaping American culture.

Note: This Article may be used as a guide. Its sequence follows the exhibit layout.

T For Texas, T For Tennessee: The Southern Roots of Lone Star Country

The exhibit begins with a section entitled “T For Texas, T For Tennessee,” which examines early nineteenth-century Anglo migration into the Spanish province of Tejas from the American South, especially Tennessee. During this period, early English-speaking immigrants, such as Davy Crockett, brought into the region music that was rooted in the folk traditions of the British Isles but already had undergone significant changes in the unique environment of the American South. The music continued to evolve in important ways on the Texas frontier. Numerous styles



Sheet music courtesy of Texas Music Museum, Austin.

"Country Music from the Lone Star State"

Schedule of Special Events

that became integral to Texas music, from fiddle breakdowns to gospel, can be traced to the early musical traditions of the American South, but they also clearly reflect changes resulting from the unique influences present in Texas and the Southwest.

The South continued to have a strong influence on the musical evolution of Texas throughout the twentieth century. Perhaps one of the best examples of this is Jimmie Rodgers, a native of Meridian, Mississippi. Often called the "Father of Country Music," Rodgers composed numerous hit songs, including "Blue Yodel Number #1," also known as "T for Texas, T for Tennessee." During his early career, Rodgers toured throughout Texas. He spent the last four years of his life in Kerrville before dying of tuberculosis in 1933 at the age of 35.

Rodgers's music influenced a wide range of Texas artists, including Ernest Tubb. In fact, Tubb started his career as a Jimmie Rodgers imitator, but went on to develop his own distinct sound as a pioneer of the Texas "honky-tonk" style that gained national popularity during and immediately after World War II. Visitors to the exhibit can view photos of these Texas music pioneers, along with other rare items, including a fiddle that belonged to Davy Crockett.

If You Want To Play In Texas, You Gotta Have a Fiddle In The Band

The fiddle has always played an important role in Texas country music, and its legacy is well-represented in the "Country Music from the Lone Star State" exhibit. Barn dances and other gatherings almost always featured a fiddle as the prominent instrument, and, fiddle contests provided an important opportunity for local musicians to demonstrate their skills. Texas fiddler Eck Robertson is believed to have made the very first commercial country recording in 1922 with two old fiddle tunes named "Sally Goodin" and "Arkansas Traveler." The unique Texas style of fiddling has continued to evolve, as western swing, pioneered by Bob Wills, Milton Brown, and others, emerged during the 1930s and incorporated the improvisational techniques of African-American jazz and blues. Today, the fiddle is as important as ever to Texas country music. A variety of Texas fiddling styles can be heard on recordings, in live performances, and at fiddle contests throughout the Southwest. The exhibit includes a collection of fiddles from Bob Wills, Johnny Gimble, and other famous Texas fiddlers, as well as posters and other memorabilia that pay tribute to the importance of the fiddle in Texas country music.

Whose Country/ Who Is Country? Country Music and the Texas Ethnic Mix

In keeping with its overall focus on the cultural diversity of the state's history, the Bullock Museum has included in this exhibit a tribute to the diverse influences that have helped shape Texas music. Although country music often is thought of as the music of rural, white southerners, it is actually an amalgamation of many different ethnic musical genres. Many of the traditional ballads and fiddle tunes are based on the folk culture of the

"Sounds of Texas" performance series

(free with museum admission)

Held in the performance area of the "Country Music from the Lone Star State" exhibit, First Floor of the Bullock Museum.

- "Waltz across Texas"

Saturday, September 28 & Sunday, Oct. 13, 1-4 pm

Two-step, swing, and yes-waltz, your way through Texas times. Learn a few steps and dance along to live music as we explore the history of some of our favorite moves.

- "Border Radio"

Saturdays, November 2, December 7 & January 5, 1 - 4 pm

Texas history meets vaudeville in this live interactive performance of the sounds and songs of early radio from the border. Meet the authors of *Border Radio*, Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford, as they "host" a radio broadcast featuring legendary figures from the past and even some local legends-to-be.

"The Spirit of Country Music" performance series:

Held in the "Spirit of Texas Theater," Second Floor of the Bullock Museum.

Series Tickets (for all 3 programs): \$25 Museum Members, \$30 Non-members. Individual Tickets: \$10 Museum Members, \$12 Non-members. To reserve tickets, call (512) 936-4649.

- "A Fiddle in the Band,"

Wednesday, October 2, 2002, 7 - 9 pm

Hear some of Texas's greatest fiddle players from across generations performing live, including Johnny Gimble, Dick Gimble, Randy Elmore, and Jason Roberts. Hosted by Lynn Denton, Director of the Bullock Museum. Moderated by John Wheat from the UT Center for American History.

- "Texas Women in Country,"

Wednesday, October 30, 2002, 7 - 9 pm

Moderated by Pat Jasper, guest curator of the "Country Music from the Lone Star State" exhibit, and Gary Hartman, Director of the Center for Texas Music History, this special event showcases some of Texas's best female country musicians on a variety of instruments, with performances by Kelly Willis, Rosie Flores, Valerie Ryles-O'Brian, Lisa Pancratz, and Cindy Cashdollar.

- "Honky Tonk Hall of Fame,"

Wednesday, November 6, 2002, 7 - 9 pm

Country Music Hall of Famer Floyd Tillman will perform. This living legend will share his experiences as one of the originators of the "honky-tonk" sound in a lively discussion hosted by Casey Monahan, Director of the Texas Music Office, and moderated by Joe Nick Patoski of *Texas Monthly* with Austin favorite Roger Wallace and special guests Johnny Gimble and Dick Gimble.

"An Evening with Bill Malone: The Culture of Texas Country Music"

Friday November 22, 2002, 6:00-8:00 pm

Held in the "Spirit of Texas Theater," Second Floor of the Bullock Museum. Bill Malone, internationally recognized scholar of country music history and author of the new book *Don't Get Above Your Raisin': Country Music and the Southern Working Class*, will discuss the diverse ethnic and cultural influences that have helped shape Texas country music over the years. Guest moderator will be Gary Hartman, Director of the Center for Texas Music History at Southwest Texas State University. Austin area educators and their students are invited to attend this free educational seminar. The general public may also attend by special reservation. For more information, please contact Angela Davis or Heather Lewis at (512) 936-4625 or e-mail: angela.davis@TheStoryofTexas.com



Sheet music courtesy of Texas Music Museum, Austin.

British Isles, but country music also has borrowed heavily from African, Mexican, German, Czech, French, and other ethnic musical traditions. This is especially so in Texas, since it had a more ethnically diverse population than other southern states.

Jimmie Rodgers, who was perhaps the most influential figure in shaping early twentieth-century country music, spent his boyhood working alongside black railroad workers and learning to play and sing blues, gospel, and other African-American styles of music. Rodgers's songs reflected these strong influences and helped set the stage for generations of younger country artists to incorporate African-American traditions into their music.

Because of its tremendous ethnic diversity, Texas country music absorbed an even greater variety of other ethnic influences than did the rest of the South. This included Mexican guitar and mariachi horn stylings, German and Czech waltzes, polkas, and "schottisches" (a German interpretation of the Scottish "highland fling"), and Cajun French fiddle and accordion music. Perhaps because of its multi-ethnic origins, Texas country music appeals to a wide variety of people from all generations, races, and ethnic groups throughout the world. This part of the exhibit includes a wealth of photos, recordings, sheet music, posters, instruments, and other items representing the diverse ethnic roots of Texas country music.

Call of the Cowboy

Country music owes much of its sound and its imagery to the Texas cowboy, and he is well-represented in the "Country Music from the Lone Star State" exhibit. Although the great cattle drives of the late 1800s only lasted about twenty years, the cowboy has become an international icon representing the pioneering spirit of Texas and the American West. Despite

popular images of the "typical" cowboy as being Caucasian, about half were of Mexican, African, Asian, or Native-American descent, and all borrowed from Mexican, German, African, and American Indian traditions in terms of clothing, equipment, food, ranching techniques, vocabulary, and music.

Cowboys were a diverse bunch, but, by the early twentieth century, their music had evolved into a distinct sound that was recognized by early folklorists, such as Texan John Lomax, who visited working ranches to collect and record the music of the cowhands. Lomax's 1910 publication of *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* helped fuel the public's fascination with frontier life and reinforced the romantic image of the rugged cowboy as a lonely hero of the American West.

With the advent of "talking pictures" in the early twentieth century, Hollywood quickly capitalized on the near-mythic



Tex Ritter, courtesy of David Dennard and Dragon Street Records.

cowboy image. Movies that featured such "singing cowboys" (and cowgirls) as Texans Gene Autry, Tex Ritter, and Dale Evans, were hugely popular and helped spawn legions of imitators and admirers. Although many of the "Hollywood cowboys" had never had much direct experience in the cattle business, many country recording stars, including Carl Sprague, Jules Verne Allen, Don Edwards, and George Strait, had spent considerable time on Texas ranches living the life they sang about. Today, the image of the Texas cowboy continues to resonate through popular country music and through American culture as a whole. This potent image is reflected in the impressive array of items included

in this part of the exhibit, such as clothing and assorted paraphernalia from Tex Ritter, Dale Evans, Gene Autry, and others.

Reaching Out Through Records and Radio

The powerful role mass media played in transforming music is also highlighted in the exhibit. By the early twentieth century, records and radio, along with movies, became important forces in the growing movement toward mass marketing popular music. Country music, which had long been considered a “regional” music unique to the South and Southwest, soon was being played on radio stations, in movie houses, and on living room phonographs throughout North America. Southern gospel music had always been a close cousin of country music. Gospel also reached new levels of national popularity through records and radio broadcasts. In fact, it became so popular, that country music radio stations and bands began incorporating gospel as a standard part of their repertoire.

By the 1920s, musicians, agents, and record labels were aggressively marketing all forms of popular music, including country music. Radio stations also quickly recognized the power of mass communication in selling products. Most aspired to dominate local radio markets, and, they matched corporate sponsors with musical groups who could help advertise and sell goods to listeners. For example, Bob Wills, Milton Brown, and others formed the highly successful “Light Crust Doughboys” in the early 1930s in order to help sell Burrus Mills Light Crust Flour over the radio.

Some radio stations staged live broadcasts at large dance halls as a way to capture the excitement of a live performance and broadcast it to a wider regional audience. In 1923, WBAP Radio in Fort Worth became perhaps the first radio station in the nation to sponsor a live country music “barn dance.” This format proved so popular,

that other stations soon launched similar programs, such as WSM’s “Grand Ole Opry” in Nashville. The “Big ‘D’ Jamboree” in Dallas was one of the best-loved radio shows of the 1940s through the 1960s and regularly featured top names in the country music field. Some stations set up just across the border in Mexico in order to avoid U.S. regulations on broadcasting. These so-called “border radio” stations broadcast very strong signals that often could be heard as far north as Canada.

The Texas recording industry also played an important role in popularizing country music. Texas recording pioneers, such as Pappy Daily, Dewey Grooms, and Jim Beck, helped launch the careers of some of country music’s biggest stars, including George Jones, Lefty Frizzell, Ray Price, and Marty Robbins. Through records, radio, and movies, Texas helped bring country music to the nation and the world. Country music would no longer be considered a regional music, but, instead, an integral part of American popular culture. Here, visitors can see vintage radios, broadcasting equipment, records, songbooks, posters, and other items related to country music and mass media.



Vintage radio courtesy of Texas Music Museum, Austin.



Pappy Daily (left). Courtesy of David Dennard and Dragon Street Records.

Expressly Texas: The Western Swing and Honky Tonk Traditions

Although Texas music has borrowed from a variety of other regional genres, the unique social, cultural, economic, and political environment of the state has given birth to musical hybrids that are “expressly Texas.” Western swing and honky tonk, two sub-genres of country music that developed within the remarkable musical climate of Texas and the Southwest, are explored fully in the exhibit.

Western swing may be the most eclectic amalgamation of musical styles in country music. Pioneered in the 1930s by such Texas musicians as Bob Wills and Milton

Brown, western swing drew on the old fiddling traditions first brought to the Southwest by nineteenth-century Anglo settlers from the Deep South. However, Wills, Brown, and other western swing musicians also had absorbed numerous other diverse musical influences during their early lives, including blues, gospel, ragtime, jazz, conjunto, mariachi, and polka, and, they easily integrated all these styles into the new sound they were developing. In fact, many of these western swing players were so fond of diverse musical styles that they frequented nightclubs in traditionally black neighborhoods, such as Dallas's "Deep Ellum," to learn blues and jazz techniques that they could incorporate into their own playing.

Western swing, like all art forms, also was a product of the social and economic climate of its time. As the Great Depression of the 1930s worsened, western swing bands had to appeal to the broadest audience possible in order to remain employed on radio and in the nightclub circuit. Consequently, they had to build on their already eclectic musical tastes to create a very broad and diverse repertoire of songs that everyone would enjoy. The result was a style of music that ranged widely from slow ballads to upbeat big band swing, and from fiddle breakdowns to blues, shuffles, and polkas. Western swing remains very popular today. Such swing bands as Asleep at the Wheel and Alvin Crow keep dance floors packed throughout the country, and, the Bob Wills Festival, held each spring in his boyhood home of Turkey, Texas, continues to draw thousands of fans every year.

Honky tonk is another hybrid form of Texas country music that owes much of its character to the social and economic changes that took place before, during, and after World War II. Named after the beer joints and nightclubs in which it was born, honky tonk reflected America's rapid move toward a more urban and industrialized society.

With the repeal of Prohibition in 1933, alcohol was once again openly available, and neighborhood taverns flourished. By the time the United States officially entered World War II in 1941, American industry was undergoing dramatic growth. Texas led the way in many aspects of industrial growth, and, it was in the Lone Star State that the honky-tonk style first came to represent the music of a new generation of urban workers. From the oil fields of West Texas to the petroleum refineries along the Texas Gulf Coast, and, in hundreds of towns in between, industry was booming, and, thousands of Texans were moving from the countryside into the cities to find jobs.

Along with this rapid shift from an agrarian lifestyle to an urban-industrial one, social customs also were quickly changing. The unfamiliar new environment of industrial employment, the pressures of urban living, changes in the social structure of the family, and increasing exposure to new ideas and moral values proved very unsettling for many Americans. The newly-emerging genre of music known as honky tonk reflects these anxieties. Honky-tonk songs often centered on themes of alcohol abuse, marital infidelity, divorce, unemployment, social alienation, and a longing for an earlier, and supposedly more simple, rural lifestyle. Texas musicians, such as Al Dexter, Ernest Tubbs, Floyd

Tillman, Lefty Frizzell, Helen Hall, George Jones, and Hank Thompson, set the tone for honky tonk and soon made it a national phenomenon.

Technology also played an important role in the growing popularity of honky tonk. Electronic amplification and public address systems (PAs) allowed honky-tonk bands to develop a more hard-driving sound that could be performed before much larger audiences. The introduction of jukeboxes also made it possible for virtually any neighborhood bar to provide its customers with the newest country hits. Thanks to improvements in radio broadcasting and record production, along with the proliferation of jukeboxes, it soon became possible to travel anywhere in the United States and hear the most popular honky-tonk stars singing their latest hit songs.

The honky-tonk tradition is still alive and well in Texas, thanks to Johnny Bush, George Strait, the Derailers, and countless other talented artists. Items ranging from Bob Wills and the Light Crust Doughboys' stage outfits to Lefty Frizzell's boots and Ray Benson's custom-made guitar help provide visitors with a vivid display of the swing and honky-tonk traditions.

Go West (Texas): Where the Country Becomes Rock

The entire state has contributed to the unique development of Texas music in important ways. However, West Texas serves here as an example of how certain factors can combine to contribute to a distinct regional musical environment. In the case of West Texas, some of the most influential American musicians of the 1950s and 1960s, specifically Buddy Holly, Roy Orbison, and Charlene Arthur, drew from the strong



Hank Thompson, courtesy of David Dennard and Dragon Street Records.

crosscurrents of country and rock and roll to create their distinct musical styles. These artists' early musical careers were rooted in country, but they were quickly drawn toward the newly developing rock and roll genre. Because of the ways in which these musicians bridged these two musical forms, they would have a profound influence on shaping rock and roll history and in forging links between country music and rock and roll.



Roy Orbison & Charlene Arthur.
Courtesy of David Dennard and Dragon Street Records.

Over the years, West Texas has produced a remarkable number of other influential musicians, as well, including Bob Wills, Waylon Jennings, Guy Clark, Tanya Tucker, Larry Gatlin, Mac Davis, Kimmie Rhodes, Joe Ely, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, and Butch Hancock, all of whom represent the unique cultural environment of that part of the state. This part of the exhibit includes rare letters to Buddy Holly from his fans, along with Roy Orbison's glasses and high school yearbook.

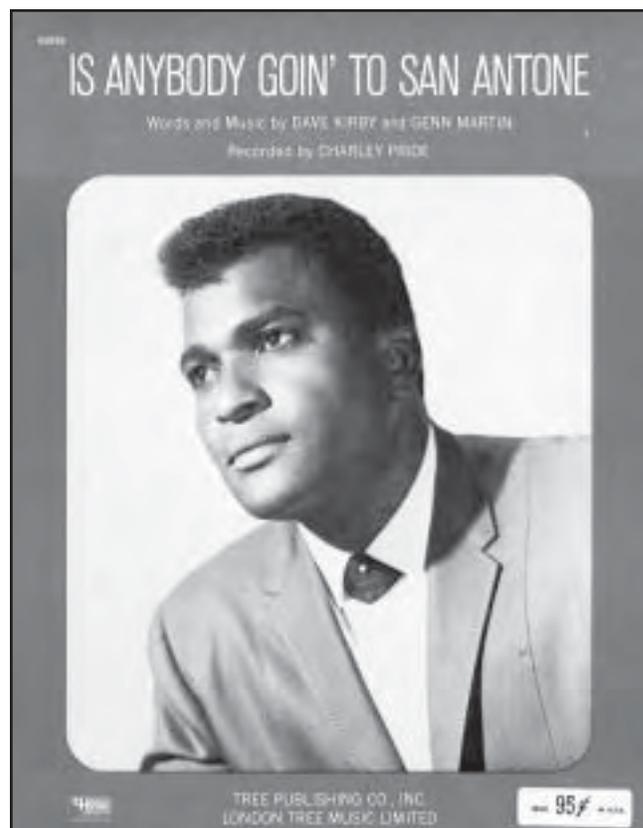
Outlaws and Austin City Limits: New Media and Progressive Country

At first glance, rock and roll and country music may seem to be somewhat incompatible. However, since rock and roll emerged on the national music scene in the 1950s, it has had a symbiotic relationship with country music. The two musical forms often have borrowed from each other and blended together in unique and sometimes surprising ways. The progressive

country music movement of the 1970s is a good example of how traditional country and the sometimes "rebellious" elements of rock and roll were fused together to create a new sub-genre that helped redefine American popular music. Since Austin was the epicenter for the progressive country movement, it seems only fitting to honor this unique musical hybrid in the Bullock Museum just blocks from the State Capitol.

Progressive country, sometimes referred to as "redneck rock," was largely a result of the strong traditions of country music in Texas merging with the music of the 1960s "hippie" movement. It began in the early 1970s, as Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, and other well-established country singers grew frustrated with what they considered to be the Nashville recording industry's overly restrictive policies regarding artistic freedom and marketing priorities. These artists were looking for a new environment in which they would be free to create and perform as they wished. Austin, with its large college student population and its active nightlife, seemed to provide the ideal setting for this innovative breed of musicians.

Nelson returned to his native Texas, where he helped lead a growing cadre of musicians who blended together country, rock, and blues in such venues as Austin's Armadillo World Headquarters and Soap Creek Saloon. Along with Waylon Jennings, Jerry Jeff Walker, Kinky Friedman, Freda (aka Marcia Ball) and the Firedogs, Michael Murphey, Tracie Nelson, Ray Wylie Hubbard, Commander Cody and the Lost Planet Airmen, and others, Nelson helped create a vibrant blend of country



Sheet music courtesy of Texas Music Museum, Austin.

and rock that appealed to audiences of all backgrounds and forced the Nashville recording industry to embrace a broader range of musical styles.

As had been the case with previous innovations in music, technology played a crucial role in popularizing progressive country. Radio, television, and movies helped spread the music and the images associated with progressive country throughout the United States and around the globe. The PBS-based live music series *Austin City Limits*, which started in 1975, took the lead in documenting and promoting Texas music and musicians. Over the years, *Austin City Limits* has built an international reputation for quality musical programming and for helping launch the careers of some of the most influential Texas musicians of recent years. Visitors to this display area will be treated to video clips from the legendary live music program, as well as a variety of items belonging to the stars of this era.

When You're Hot, You're Hot: Crossover and the Contemporary Country Top Ten

As early as the 1920s, country music was expanding beyond its traditional southern borders and becoming a nationally, and internationally, popular form of music. Since that time, country artists have continued to reach across musical boundaries to attract fans from a broad range of backgrounds and musical tastes. Although purists may decry the commercial marketing of country music, it is important to remember that, even many of the early pioneers of "traditional" country music actively sought opportunities to capitalize on their music and build financially successful careers.

Texas has produced many talented country artists who have had tremendous success in "crossing over" to broader markets. Jim Reeves, Ray Price, Barbara Mandrell, Charley Pride, Kenny Rogers, George Strait, Leann Rimes, Clint Black, Pat Green, and others have blended traditional country with pop, rock and roll, and other styles as a way to appeal to a larger audience and to revitalize country music as it continues to evolve. This part of the exhibit includes outfits from Jim Reeves, the Dixie Chicks, and George Strait, as well as photos and posters of other Texans whose music has had enormous appeal outside of the traditional country market.

Deep Within My Heart Lies a Melody: The Texas Songwriting Tradition

Songwriting always has been a vital part of the Texas music scene, and this segment of the exhibit examines the role of songwriters in the evolution of country music. From the earliest settlers in Texas, who reinterpreted traditional ballads to fit their new surroundings, to today's seasoned professional songwriters, Texans have been among the most influential and prolific songwriters in country music. For many Texans of all backgrounds, music has provided a "voice" for expressing the joys and sorrows of everyday life.

The state's unique environment has given its music a distinct character, and this is clearly represented in Texas songwriting

traditions. Texas cowboys reshaped older songs according to their own experiences. Blues and gospel music underwent important changes in their migration from the South into the Southwest. "Transplanted" musicians, such as Jimmie Rodgers, were significantly affected by having spent time in Texas, and their music reflects those influences.

Texas songwriters also have had a profound impact on shaping mainstream country music. Cindy Walker, who wrote many of Bob Wills's most popular songs, helped bring western swing to a national audience. Ernest Tubb, Floyd Tillman, Lefty Frizzell, George Jones, and Buck Owens popularized honky tonk, with their graphic depictions of life in a more urban, industrialized setting. By contrast, Roger Miller has had a very successful career writing humorous country and pop songs.

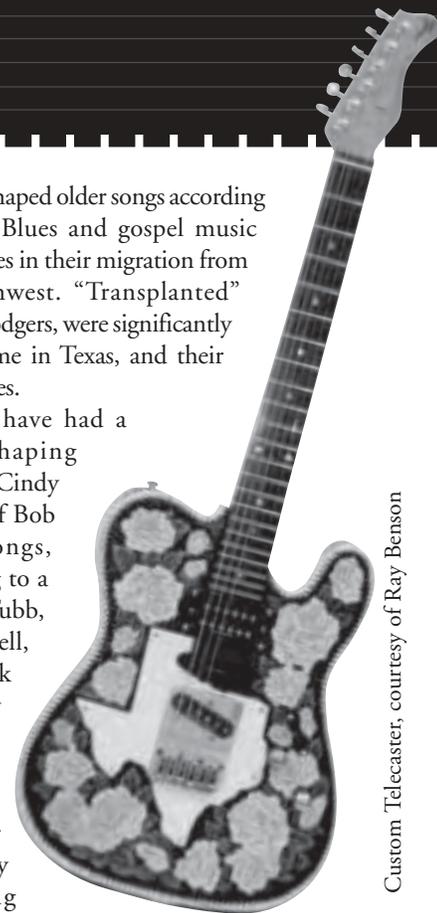
Willie Nelson, Jerry Jeff Walker, Michael Martin Murphey, Waylon Jennings, Townes Van Zandt, Guy Clark, Billy Joe Shaver, and others have been some of the most productive and influential songwriters of the past thirty years.

A younger generation of Texas songwriters already has proven that it can uphold the high standards set by those who came before. Lyle Lovett, Robert Earl Keen, Tish Hinojosa, Steve Earl, Nancy Griffith, Bruce Robison, Clay Blaker, Kelly Willis, and many others are continuing the strong tradition of Texas songwriting. This display includes handwritten lyrics from Jerry Jeff Walker, a songwriting notebook from Townes Van Zandt, and Willie Nelson's first songbook, in which the eleven-year-old child prodigy already was composing songs about love and heartache.

Waltz Across Texas: From Ranch Dance to Line Dance

Dancing is an important part of music in all societies, and Texas is certainly no exception. This section of the exhibit pays tribute to that passion Texans always have shared for dancing. Well before Europeans arrived in the region, Native Americans celebrated their culture through both music and dance. As Spanish, English, German, French, African, and other ethnic groups arrived in the area, they brought with them a strong tradition of singing and dancing.

In Texas, dancing has always provided an opportunity for courting, socializing, demonstrating physical prowess, and escaping from the rigors of everyday life. Early settlers would travel many miles to attend barn dances or house dances. As towns grew, more and more community centers, dance halls,



Custom Telecaster, courtesy of Ray Benson

and nightclubs became available for dancing. Although modern urban dance halls are usually more “adult-oriented,” many rural venues still reflect their very family-oriented origins. On almost any weekend night, you can find dozens of rural dance halls throughout Texas in which families, couples, and single people gather to talk, drink, play, and dance. The exhibit’s display of posters, neon beer signs, and other paraphernalia provide the authentic feel of a Texas dance hall.

Instrumentally Texas Country: What the Pickers Pick

The “Country Music from the Lone Star State” exhibit concludes with a look at the important role instruments themselves have had in shaping country music. Although it may not be evident at first glance, the broad range of musical instruments and the ways in which they have been played have helped give Texas country music its unique sound.

Early settlers of all ethnic backgrounds had to make use of instruments that were easily accessible, highly portable, and loud enough to be heard in a crowded tavern or dance hall. Fiddles, guitars, and mandolins all fit the bill and became the instruments of choice. The ways in which these instruments were arranged together required the musicians to be innovative in terms of who would play rhythm, melody, harmony, and other parts. Instrumental duets, such as “twin fiddles” commonly used in western swing, grew out of the creative use of available instruments.

As the twentieth century brought electronic amplification and other technological innovations, musicians were freed from earlier concerns over volume and portability and could focus on improving technical skills and expanding the range of instrumentation. Electric guitars and pedal steel guitars soon became standard instruments in country bands. New performing and recording technology allowed musicians to continue innovating and redefining the role of instruments in Texas country music. Here, museum visitors will see guitars, mandolins, drums, and other instruments played by such notable Texas musicians as Herb Remington, Tiny Moore, and Buck Owens.

With its broad scope and engaging format, the Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum’s “Country Music from the Lone Star State” exhibit provides a wonderfully entertaining and thought-

provoking presentation on the history of country music in Texas and the Southwest. With a variety of displays and special programs scheduled throughout the duration of the exhibit, visitors of all ages and backgrounds will enjoy exploring the unique musical heritage that is such an important part of Texas. ■

The Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum is located at 1800 North Congress Avenue, Austin, TX 78701. The museum is open Monday-Saturday 9:00AM to 6:00PM and Sunday 1:00 to 6:00PM. For more information, please call 512-936-4601 or visit the museum’s website at: www.TheStoryofTexas.com

