

Sullivan: Tary Owens

**Tary Owens,  
Texas Folklorist and Musician:  
A Life Remembered**

Ruth K. Sullivan

Tary Owens and his wife Maryann Price at their home in Austin, March 2000.  
Courtesy Ralph Barrera and the *Austin American-Statesman*.



*Shortly after the death of Austin-based musician and folklorist Tary Owens on September 21, 2003, Brad Buchholz, writing for the Austin American-Statesman, remarked that, “Tary Owens devoted most of his life to music, though only rarely to his own. The greater mission, to Owens, was to champion the music of forgotten or unsung Texas bluesmen—to put their songs on records, to place them on a stage, to encourage a larger public to celebrate their artistry.”<sup>1</sup>*

Owens began that mission in the 1960s, when he attended the University of Texas at Austin and studied with noted folklorists Américo Paredes and Roger Abrahams. Funded by a Lomax Foundation grant, Owens traveled around Texas recording a variety of folk musicians, including guitarists Mance Lipscomb, Freddie King, and Bill Neely, as well as barrelhouse piano players Robert Shaw and Roosevelt T. Williams, also known as the “Grey Ghost.” Owens remained involved in the lives of these musicians for the next several decades and, in some cases, was largely responsible for helping rescue them from obscurity and resurrect their professional careers.

Tary Owens worked with a number of other important Texas artists throughout his life, including Townes Van Zandt, Guy Clark, Kris Kristofferson, Johnny and Edgar Winter, and Janis Joplin, whom he befriended in high school in Port Arthur and remained close to until her death in 1970. Although Owens was a musician himself, he devoted most of his time and energy to preserving and promoting the music and the careers of others. Fortunately, because of his efforts to document a wide range of styles found throughout Texas, Owens has helped provide all of us with a much more complete understanding of the unique and complex musical heritage of the Lone Star State.

Tary Kelly Owens was born in Toledo, Ohio, on November 6, 1942, less than one year after the United States entered World War II. Shortly after Tary’s birth, his father, Louis Owens, a farm boy from East Texas, was drafted into the U.S. Army and went to Georgia for basic training. Mary Charlotte Owens took her infant son and spent the next three years living in a variety of locales, beginning in Georgia close to the army post where Louis trained. After her husband shipped out to fight in the Pacific, Mary moved back and forth from Ohio to southern



A young Tary Owens

Illinois to live with her parents, Helen and John Kelly, then to Texas to stay with the Owens Family, and eventually back to Ohio. Before Louis's discharge from the service in 1946, Mary took Tary on train trips to visit his father at a variety of army bases where he was posted. These train rides form some of Owens's earliest memories and helped shape the direction of his adult life:

When I was first exposed to music, it was big band music on trains, riding trains during World War II, following my father around to various army bases... It seemed like every train had a band on it at the time. And I'd sing with the band, stuff like, "Cross the Alley from the Alamo"...my parents knew I loved singing and they got me enrolled when I was about three years old in a dancing and singing school in Toledo, Ohio.<sup>2</sup>

While his parents loved music, neither of them actually played a musical instrument. Both grandfathers, however, were accomplished musicians. Owens related the story of his family's musical heritage:

My Texas grandfather...played every stringed instrument there was and could also play organ, piano, and he had a mandocello, which is a pretty rare stringed instrument...He'd been a dance hall fiddler in the area of Athens and Murchison in East Texas. And apparently his father [also was a fiddle player]...the fiddling had been passed down for several generations of Owensens. They were fiddlers in North Carolina and Alabama and Texas...And one of my uncles played in the Light Crust Doughboys.<sup>3</sup>

As a teenager, Owens discovered rock and roll. Hearing Chuck Berry on the radio singing "Maybellene" fascinated Owens. "I'd never heard anything like that before, and it just took my total attention."<sup>4</sup> However, it was Elvis Presley who had the biggest impact on Owens, as well as millions of other white teenagers, by blending together traditional "Anglo" music, especially country, with African-American musical styles. As music historian Joe Specht describes it, "Many white teens were already in tune with the rhythm and blues sounds that were in the air, but Elvis effortlessly mixed white hillbilly or country music with black R&B like no one before." Presley's style of music influenced many other performers, including Texas musicians and future Rock and Roll Hall of Famers Buddy Holly and Roy Orbison. As it turns out, Texas also had an important impact on Presley's career. During 1955, he made two hundred appearances in fifteen states, and, "At least eighty of these, or almost 40%, were in Texas." The tremendous popularity Presley gained in the Lone Star State at the beginning of his career helped propel him into the national spotlight. As Elvis himself later said, "I sorta got my start in Texas."<sup>5</sup>

In 1956, when Tary was only fourteen, the Owens Family moved to Beaumont, Texas. During World War II, Beaumont's crucial role in the booming Gulf Coast petrochemical industry had led to rapid population growth, as Americans from a variety of racial, ethnic, social, and cultural backgrounds flocked to the region. By the 1950s, Beaumont, along with the neighboring cities of Orange and Port Arthur, formed an area known as the "Golden Triangle" of the Upper Texas Gulf Coast.<sup>6</sup> The unique combination of ethnic and cultural influences found in the Golden Triangle helped foster a complex and colorful musical environment, which would have a profound effect on Tary Owens and others of his generation, including Port Arthur native, Janis Joplin.<sup>7</sup>

As rich and diverse as the entire state's musical culture is, the Golden Triangle, where Tary and his family settled, is particularly eclectic. This area has been fertile ground for important developments in blues, country, Cajun, zydeco, rock

and roll, and many other genres. Although the eclectic ethnic makeup of the local community allowed Owens to broaden his musical horizons, the tumultuous racial dynamics of the South during the late 1950s also proved difficult for him to deal with. As he would later state:

In some ways coming to Texas was a move backward...because we were right in the middle of the...integration issue. I had gone to school in the North with black kids, not many, but there were one or two in most of the classes that I was in. And I didn't think much of it. But we got to Beaumont and I...rode the bus to school, and every street corner by the bus stands there would be black women, middle-aged black women wearing starched white outfits as maids or cooks. And they would be standing waiting for the bus and all the kids would be screaming obscenities at them out the window of the bus. It was just horrible.<sup>8</sup>

Owens was shocked by this kind of blatant racial prejudice and felt alienated from his peers. Although Louis Owens had been raised in Texas, Tary observed that "my father didn't have

knew he wasn't black, but all the music he played was "black" music...Of course, I loved it.<sup>11</sup>

While living in Beaumont, Owens also met future blues guitar legend Johnny Winter and his brother Edgar, who had their own radio show on Saturday afternoons. According to Owens, the Winters were a "teenage kind of Everly Brothers band" and called themselves "Johnny and the Jammers." The three often had long, earnest discussions about blues music and R&B.<sup>12</sup>

In 1957, the Owens Family moved to Port Arthur, seventeen miles south of Beaumont. Port Arthur was largely a working-class community, in which nearly everyone's livelihood depended in one way or another on the oil refineries and petrochemical plants. As Owens observed, "Port Arthur was a rough town. If you went to school there, you were going to be challenged."<sup>13</sup>

For Owens, surviving in such surroundings required that he quickly find his own circle of like-minded friends. In September 1957, he enrolled at Thomas Jefferson High School, where he and a small group of classmates developed a bond that would last for the remainder of his life. His deep passion and wide-ranging appreciation for music practically guaranteed that Owens's cadre of friends also would be music enthusiasts. One such pal was Janis Joplin, who would become what some have

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an ounce of prejudice in him, and neither did my mother. I just hadn't been exposed to that intolerance and hatred and hostility."<sup>9</sup>

Despite having to grapple with the unfamiliar social environment in which he found himself, Owens did benefit from the diverse and prolific music scene around him. He listened to local radio and attended concerts by a variety of regional and national groups that performed in the Beaumont area. J.P. Richardson, later known as "The Big Bopper," was born in nearby Sabine Pass in 1932, and started his musical career as a disc jockey on Beaumont radio station KTRM.<sup>10</sup> Years later, Owens acknowledged the impact that Richardson had on him:

'The Big Bopper,' J.P. Richardson, who at that time still hadn't recorded any songs of his own...was the afternoon, drive-time, school-time, 4-7 PM disc jockey and he mimicked a black man. Most people

called "the best white blues singer in American history" and "the greatest female singer in the history of rock 'n' roll."<sup>14</sup> Although Joplin's meteoric rise to superstardom later separated her from many of her Texas friends, she and Tary stayed in contact until her death in 1970.

During his first year at Jefferson High, Owens and Joplin were in a social studies class together. He remembered that one of the topics which generated heated debate in the class was "the issue of integration and the issue of race, and Janis and I were the two 'nigger lovers' in the class. We started getting called that by the other kids...She and I became friends during that time; we were allies in the social studies class."<sup>15</sup> Soon Owens and his friends discovered Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road*, which fired their imaginations and made them long to be part of the "beat generation":

[We] wanted to be beatniks, but were just too young. I couldn't even grow a beard. We read books,

which was *verboden* in Port Arthur. And we were starting to listen to jazz, because by 1958, as far as I was concerned, rock and roll was over with. The Big Bopper, Buddy Holly, and [Ritchie] Valens were killed. Elvis got sent to the army...The rebellion part of rock and roll ended, and rock and roll was cleaned up, sanitized, and sounded like crap. So we started listening more and more to the black music. And that meant blues and jazz...I love them both equally.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to Janis Joplin, some of Tary Owens's other closest friends included Jim Langdon and Jack Smith. Langdon played trombone in the school band and also performed with local R&B and rock and roll bands.<sup>17</sup> Jack Smith also was passionate about music, and Owens, Joplin, Langdon, and Smith frequented

None of us played anything but we all sang...Janis was just influenced by any female blues singer—Big Mama [Thornton] was one of the ones, but she was probably more influenced by Bessie Smith...Her first singing was at a jazz jam session in Beaumont that we went to where Jim Langdon was playing... It was basically a band of black jazz musicians who played R&B too and on Sundays they got together for jam sessions...And she got up and sang two Bessie Smith songs and got a really good response.<sup>20</sup>

After graduating from Jefferson High in 1960, Owens started college at Lamar Tech (Lamar Institute of Technology) in Beaumont. Janis Joplin also enrolled at Lamar Tech, but as Tary admits, "None of us were very good students." It was at Lamar

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the many honky tonks and juke joints scattered along the back roads throughout the Texas-Louisiana border region.<sup>18</sup> Owens described their visits to the nearby night clubs:

That's where we all grew up in a place called The Big Oaks Club; another one called LuAnn's; another called Buster's; another called the Shady Grove...Buster's had country music. Luann's and the State Line had black R&B, rock and roll, and the Big Oaks had white bands doing rhythm and blues. And Jim Langdon was in those white big bands; also Johnny Winter—that's when I got reacquainted with Johnny. He was in this band that was called Jerry and the Counts. And the whole thing was being able to sound black. There [would be a singer who] could sing like Bobby Bland or Ray Charles...Lots of horns...and they always opened with jazz, playing jazz. That was a musical format that I haven't found since I left there.<sup>19</sup>

By the late 1950s, Owens and his friends had turned increasingly away from rock and roll and were devoting their attention almost entirely to more traditional folk, blues, and R&B:

We were listening to Leadbelly, Odetta; you know the folk revival of the...60s was coming on. And that was when Janis learned that she could sing—by singing Leadbelly and Odetta songs at our parties...

Tech that Owens enrolled in an English course about folklore. His research into folklore, and particularly folk ballads, piqued his interest in exploring and documenting folk music from an academic perspective. By 1962, Owens had decided to move to Austin and enroll at the University of Texas in order to study folk music.<sup>21</sup>

During the early 1960s, Austin was, in many ways, still a typical "college town," enhanced by the population of students from all over Texas, the United States, and the world. Life on the University of Texas campus generally revolved around course work, extracurricular activities, and for some students, a social life centered on sororities and fraternities. However, challenges to these established traditions were already fomenting in Austin when Tary Owens arrived in 1962. It was earlier that summer, while he was still living in Beaumont, that Owens had met John Clay and Bill Beckman, both University of Texas students. They invited Tary to Austin to visit them at their apartment complex near campus, known affectionately as "the Ghetto." Owens recalled some of the people he met there and the music he heard:

That weekend I heard Powell [St. John] and Lannie [Wiggins] play and was very impressed. Lannie had a Martin 017 and a banjo. He played both very well, finger picking and flat picking on the guitar. On banjo he could frail "old timey" style as well as three finger "Scruggs" style picking. He seemed to know all of Woody Guthrie's songs, as well as traditional ones like "Railroad Bill." Also, jug band

tunes like the Memphis Jug Band's "Stealin'" and Leadbelly's "Goin' Up That Mississippi River." I had never heard anyone play traditional music so well. Lannie had a huge influence on me and I vowed to learn to play like him...John and Powell were the first hipster songwriters [in Austin] who wrote traditional style.<sup>22</sup>

Later in the summer, Owens left the Beaumont-Port Arthur area for good and moved to Austin to join his new friends at the Ghetto, a few blocks from the university. While he arrived with few college credits, his interest in folklore had grown substantially because of the English courses he had taken at Lamar Tech:

I first got interested in folk music before I came to Austin...I was taking an English course from Dr. Frank Abernathy at Lamar Tech in Beaumont...he had been an officer in the Folklore Society and...was a folklore nut. I ended up taking my freshman English from him. We talked about folk music—collecting folk music, finding it and the people that were doing the old songs.<sup>23</sup>

The Ghetto soon became a hotbed of musical activity for Owens and his friends. As University of Texas art major, Powell St. John, a long-time Ghetto resident and harmonica player recalls:

By this time (the summer of 1962), I was heavily involved in the folk music revival that was our generation's version of goldfish swallowing and raccoon coats. Janis Joplin was a frequent visitor to the Ghetto, and she and Lannie Wiggins, a hot guitar and banjo picker...and I had worked up a set of material and were having great fun picking and singing and drinking beer every night in the back yard. Tary and Langdon were jazz fans. Langdon was an accomplished trombone player and...Tary was on the scene and now he was playing guitar...I guess, getting into the music that was really hip at the time.<sup>24</sup>

Owens, and some other Ghetto residents took part regularly in the Thursday night "folksings" at the university's Student Union building. These were open to anyone who wanted to sing and play or just listen. Author Barry Shank, who discusses the development of 1960s Austin music in his book, *Dissonant Identities*, suggests that the students who participated in these weekly folksings were looking for ways to differentiate themselves "from the student body represented by fraternities,

sororities, and football players." The Ghetto crowd, including Owens, Joplin, and the others "latched onto the singing of traditional folk songs as a way of actively demonstrating their difference—their 'beatnik' or 'proto-hippie' status."<sup>25</sup> Owens remembered these gatherings with his friends and described the folksings as the forerunner of the folk music scene in Austin:

All sorts of people would come to the folksing... We started the organization for traditional music—that's what we called it; we didn't use the word folk. We started putting on concerts in the Union, not the ballroom, the Union Theater, at the north end of the building; there was a movie theater and auditorium. It's still there...Michael Nesmith, from San Antonio (later a member of the pop group, The Monkees)...well he had a trio, a folk trio that imitated the Kingston Trio. He brought his trio up to Austin to play at the folksing. I think they were expecting to bowl everybody over; we were not Kingston Trio fans at all. As far as we were concerned, that was old history. They were not well received.<sup>26</sup>

Soon, Owens and others from the folksings, most specifically the Ghetto crowd, found out about another gathering of musicians and singers every Wednesday night at Kenneth Threadgill's bar on North Lamar Boulevard in Austin. Owens and his friends heard that Threadgill could sing like Jimmie Rodgers and had a jukebox filled with records by Rodgers and Hank Williams.<sup>27</sup>

By the time Owens and his friends discovered Threadgill's, it was a well-established destination for a diverse group of music patrons. In some ways, Kenneth Threadgill's personal history is similar to that of Owens. Threadgill was born on September 12, 1909, in Peniel, Texas, northeast of Dallas. His family eventually moved to Beaumont, however, and as a young man, Threadgill worked at the Tivoli Theater where Jimmie Rodgers, the man later dubbed the "Father of Country Music," performed. The young Threadgill, who had practiced imitating Rodgers's distinctive singing and yodeling style, was able to meet his idol backstage and impressed him with his own yodeling skills.

In 1933, Threadgill moved to Austin and began working at an old service station located at 6416 North Lamar Boulevard. In December of that same year, he bought the place and converted it into a tavern with a restaurant, gas station, and an area in which he and other performers could sing and play. Taking advantage of the recent repeal of Prohibition, Threadgill applied for and received the first beer license in Austin. He and his wife, Mildred, ran the venue for the next four decades, closing only for a brief time during World War II. Although



Kenneth Threadgill and the Hootenanny Hoots, 1971. Courtesy Burton Wilson.

the club could seat only about forty-five customers, the place was usually packed on weekends when Threadgill and his band, the Hootenanny Hoots, played. Wednesday nights became the designated time “for university students and local residents to congregate for beer, country music, yodeling, and the ‘Alabama Jubilee,’ the song that would usually get Threadgill to dance his patented shuffle.” Those Wednesday night gatherings attracted a diverse group made up of “goat ropers, university Greeks, hippies, and average Joes,” who mixed together to enjoy the music and camaraderie.<sup>28</sup>

Other students from the University of Texas had discovered Threadgill’s around 1959 and had become regular performers at the Wednesday night gatherings. Among these older students was Bill Malone, whose dissertation on the history of country music would evolve into the groundbreaking book, *Country Music U.S.A.*, which is still considered by many historians to be the most comprehensive scholarly study of country music. Others included Stan Alexander, an English graduate student who studied traditional folk songs and ballads, Willie Benson, a psychology major and bluegrass guitarist, and Ed Mellon, who played mandolin in the style of Bill Monroe, the so-called

“Father” of bluegrass. Malone, Alexander, Benson, and Mellon had been playing weekly at Threadgill’s for years before Owens and his friends first visited the establishment.<sup>29</sup>

Meanwhile, back at the Ghetto, Powell St. John on harmonica, Lannie Wiggins on guitar and banjo, and Janis Joplin on auto-harp and vocals, had started performing together as the Waller Creek Boys. Along with Owens and others, they began going to Threadgill’s to take part in the Wednesday night music gatherings. As Owens recalled, “Kenneth [Threadgill] not only welcomed all of us and treated us like his children, [but] encouraged us to play.”<sup>30</sup> Owens agreed that these Wednesday night performances attracted a diverse group of patrons. “The Threadgill’s music scene was like a coming together of the rednecks and, they weren’t hippies yet, the pre-hippie hipsters, I guess. All three places were our scene—Threadgill’s, the Ghetto, and the folksing.”<sup>31</sup>

Though not yet a student in 1962, Tary Owens often hung out on campus at the “Chuck Wagon” and attended the folksings in the Student Union, where he befriended a variety of students, including Gilbert Shelton, Tony Bell, Lieuen Adkins, and Bill Helmer, who were on the staff of *The Texas Ranger*, the campus

humor magazine. Owens also met his first wife, Madeleine Peppel (now Villatoro) at the Chuck Wagon before he enrolled as a student. Madeleine recounted those college days:

My mother had wanted me to be in a sorority. I was very shy and [that was] not my thing at all...I had gotten out of the sorority and there was a whole group of people that were meeting in the Chuck Wagon...that's where I first met Tary...And that's where there were a lot of young people who were counter-culture...they were outsiders in a way... [Tary] was writing some poetry. I don't know that he was actually writing songs. He was already familiar, I guess, because of Janis's interest in Appalachian music, folk music, and ballads...that's the kind of old ballads [that] Tary would sing...I got pregnant very soon after we got to know each other [in 1963]. Our son [Willie] was born in April of 1964...once we were married and he was taking the courses...we were spending all of our money on records. He was accumulating all the music—the blues. He was really getting into that; buying a lot of the blues music.<sup>32</sup>

Owens formally enrolled at the University of Texas in 1963. He knew that he loved Madeleine and believed that he should get married and go back to school in order to support his new family:

[I decided] I'll go back to school and get a real job and quit this beatnik life. I never quit the beatnik life, but I did get a job at the Austin State Hospital as an attendant...that's what they called the people who took care of the mentally ill...I worked on the 11 to 7 shift at night...I worked there for three years while I enrolled, got myself back into UT. I went to summer school one summer to get my grades up... and once I got in, I went straight through for the next three years. [I] worked at the state hospital and participated in the Threadgill's band every Wednesday night and participated in the growing underground scene that grew out of the Ghetto.<sup>33</sup>

Drugs became an important part of the counter-culture movement in Austin and elsewhere throughout America during the 1960s. Because many of them were using illegal drugs, Owens and his friends knew that the Ghetto was under police surveillance and that they all faced the possibility of being arrested. Owens commented on the widespread use of drugs at the Ghetto:

We smoked pot, but it was hard to get. You had to go over to the east side and buy it from black jazz

musicians. Even best friends at the Ghetto would not tell each other that they smoked pot. Everyone was that paranoid about it. They were doing it privately, but we did start peyote there. Peyote, at the time, was legal. You could get peyote buttons at the Hudson's Cactus Farm in Leander for a nickel a bud...My first trip to Austin I took peyote. That became part of everyone's experience...And it was a very spiritual experience; it was very intense. [In Beaumont] well, we smoked grass; I had my first grass—I got it from Janis. She got it in Mexico, on a trip to Mexico. There were a lot of drugs around [Beaumont], but we weren't part of the drug scene there, except for smoking pot...Not very much pot at all. The drugs started in Austin.<sup>34</sup>

Owens moved out of the Ghetto in 1963 and into a house on 32nd Street, right across from Burton Wilson, a well-known Austin photographer. When Madeleine Peppel first met Owens, he was living there, but after the marriage, they moved to a new location:

We lived by the campus; it was 22nd and Pearl Street...an old stucco, two-story building that had apartments...it cost like \$50 a month. And down the hall was Tommy Hall...And next door was Gilbert Shelton, Tony Bell, and they were...doing the *Ranger* humor magazine. And, Gilbert had a piano there, and I can remember that Maria Muldar came, at one time, and played there. They had a party, and she played.<sup>35</sup>

Once Owens enrolled at the University of Texas, he registered for classes in folklore taught within the English department by Drs. Américo Paredes and Roger Abrahams. The University already had a strong tradition of folklore scholarship established by such celebrated faculty members as J. Frank Dobie and John Henry Faulk. The fact that Paredes had recorded Mexican-American folk music during the 1950s, and Abrahams had a 1961 recording on the Prestige label, impressed Owens and inspired him to follow in their footsteps.<sup>37</sup>

The first folklore class Owens took was an introductory course taught by Paredes. The students' first assignment was to find a selection of folklore, bring it to class for discussion, and then write a paper about it. Owens used material he had found earlier during his class with Dr. Frank Abernathy at Lamar Tech:

That was the first folklore...I had collected. I'd listened to an East Texas man singing, "Black-Jack David"...which is one of the oldest ballads going back to England and France. It used to be the "Raggle,

Taggey Gypsies, Oh,” and “Gypsy Davey” and lots of different variances...the East Texas version of it was “Black-Jack David.” [This song] is one of the Childe [ballads] and very well documented...very popular in England and Ireland.<sup>38</sup>

Paredes was quite taken with the song, and he was impressed by Owens’s writing and his keen interest in the whole process of folklore. Owens found Paredes to be a superb teacher and mentor, as well as someone with his own fascinating story, who had been a folklore “subject” before he became a scholar and educator.<sup>39</sup>

Born in Brownsville, Texas on September 3, 1915, Américo Paredes experienced first-hand the border tensions and violence that followed the 1910 Mexican Revolution, as well as the ethnic bias and discrimination aimed at Mexican Americans. He attended public schools, worked a variety of jobs to help support his family, and during summer vacations often took ranch jobs and “listened to corridos, folk tales, and oral traditions recounted by border ‘Mexicanos’ around the campfire.” All of these were influences he would eventually incorporate into his own poetry and prose. Along the way he also learned to play guitar and sing. After graduation from high school in 1934, Paredes enrolled at Brownsville Junior College, worked for the *Brownsville Herald* as a staff writer, and submitted his poetry to *La Prensa*, a San Antonio newspaper. His first book of poetry, *Cantos de Adolescencia*, was published in 1936. Paredes continued writing for the *Herald*, and he worked for Pan American Airways prior to his enlistment as a U. S. Army infantryman in 1944.<sup>40</sup>

During the 1940s, Paredes met Texas folklorist and author William A. Owens, who was traveling throughout the state collecting regional folk songs as part of his job with the Extension Division of the University of Texas. Owens recorded Paredes singing some of the songs of the Texas-Mexico border region. The songs and stories Owens gathered on this trip eventually became his University of Iowa doctoral dissertation, published in 1950 as *Texas Folksongs*.<sup>41</sup>

This meeting with William Owens sparked Paredes’s interest in learning more about the ballads and folklore of the Mexican border. After his discharge from the service and several years working overseas for the Red Cross, Paredes enrolled at the University of Texas intent on fulfilling his dream of becoming an English professor. He completed his undergraduate degree in one year, his M.A. in English and folklore within two years, and, by 1956, had received his doctorate. After one year of teaching at Texas Western College in El Paso, Paredes returned to Austin and accepted a tenure-track professorship at the University of Texas, teaching folklore and creative writing. His doctoral dissertation on the legendary Tejano figure, Gregorio Cortez, was published in 1958 under the title of *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and its Hero*. The book was an immediate

success and brought Paredes widespread recognition. *Folktales of Mexico*, published in 1970, and his 1976 work, *A Texas Mexican Cancionero: Folksongs of the Lower Border*, soon solidified his reputation as a first-rate folklorist of the American Southwest.<sup>42</sup>

By the time Tary Owens enrolled at the university, Paredes was established within the Department of English as the up-and-coming expert on folklore. He had become, as Owens observed, “the spokesman for Mexican culture” on campus. Paredes was involved in “not only defending Mexican culture, but telling it like it is about the border skirmishes and the border conflict–culture conflicts.” He challenged the scholarship of such venerable professors as Walter Prescott Webb and J. Frank Dobie, who told the story of the American Southwest from a decidedly Anglo perspective. As Owens remarked, “Paredes was giving the other side of the story. It says something about all three men–Paredes, Webb, and Dobie–that they were able to disagree in their writing but get along socially...They were able to accommodate each other and all three lived out and finished their careers at UT.”<sup>43</sup>

Within a short time after Tary Owens began his course work in folklore, Paredes and Abrahams informed him about a grant from the Lomax Foundation that was available to students in folklore studies. The foundation was named for John Lomax, the famous American folklorist and one of the founders of the Texas Folklore Society. Lomax was two years old when his parents moved from Mississippi in 1869 to a farm located on a branch of the Chisholm Trail in Bosque County, Texas. He spent his youth listening to the ballads and folksongs sung by local cowboys and, while still a young man, began to write down the songs he heard. Collecting western ballads and other folksongs continued as his life’s work.

During the 1930s, John Lomax, with his son Alan as his assistant, traveled throughout the South and Southwest making field recordings of local musicians. Their travels included trips into prisons to record the “spirituals” and work songs of the black inmates. While not the first folklorists to use a recording machine, “The Lomaxes employed superior technology, recorded far more widely, and embraced the recording medium with more passion than previous collectors.” The Lomaxes are credited with “discovering” the now-legendary blues singer-songwriter Huddie Ledbetter (better known as Leadbelly) at Angola prison in Louisiana. After his release in 1934, the Lomaxes worked to help promote Leadbelly’s career and preserve his musical legacy. Despite their important contributions to Leadbelly’s professional success, some scholars, including Benjamin Filene, point to the negative consequences of his relationship with the father and son team of folklorists:

[The Lomaxes] realized that if they wanted Lead Belly to achieve mainstream popularity his very

incompatibility with mainstream society was his greatest asset. This realization led the Lomaxes to manipulate not only Lead Belly's image but also his music...[his] commercial strength depended on the perception that his songs were "pure folk." But...audiences would not necessarily appreciate [Leadbelly's] style unadulterated. So...the Lomaxes encouraged him to make his singing more accessible to urban [white] audiences.<sup>44</sup>

The manipulation of Leadbelly's music and appearance also included John Lomax's exercising firm control over the revenues Leadbelly received for concert appearances and recordings, which led to tensions between the two men. Despite these problems, Filene describes John and Alan Lomax as "the most spectacularly successful and innovative folksong-collecting team of the twentieth century."<sup>45</sup> Their lifelong dedication to preserving the wide variety of American folk music is reflected in archived Lomax collections,

Some of the prisoners that [the Lomaxes] recorded didn't get out. One in particular was there thirty years later and I recorded him. He was seventy some years old...just a minor criminal, minor burglary, but for some reason they just kept him in prison, and I don't know why, because he wasn't a violent man...And...[Dave] Tippen is on those first [Lomax] recordings, and he's one of the major people that I recorded thirty years later.<sup>48</sup>

Owens recorded a variety of traditional worksongs and spirituals sung by the inmates at the Huntsville prison units, including oral narratives called "toasts," a format that Owens's mentor Roger Abrahams knew well. Abrahams's doctoral dissertation, from the University of Pennsylvania, was published as *Deep Down in the Jungle: Black American Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia*. It contained a collection and commentary

## Using Texas prisons as one base for research, Owens made a trip to Huntsville, Texas, in August 1965, and recorded the songs and story telling of a variety of prison inmates.

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housed at numerous institutions, including the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas and the Archive of Folksong at the Library of Congress.<sup>46</sup>

Once Owens expressed his interest in the Lomax grant, Abrahams and Paredes assisted him in the application process. The foundation's goal in awarding these grants was to fund the gathering of field recordings similar to those done by John and Alan Lomax during the 1930s. Although the grants were usually given to graduate students, and Owens was still an undergraduate, he discovered that the University had no graduate students pursuing a major in folklore studies. The foundation ultimately awarded Owens a stipend of \$500 to pursue his topic, "The Folk Music of Central Texas." He purchased a \$150 professional quality microphone and spent the remainder on a reel-to-reel tape recorder. As Owens continued course work toward a degree in English and anthropology, he also traveled around the state to record the folk musicians he found.<sup>47</sup>

Over the next several years, Owens recorded some of the same musicians the Lomaxes had documented during the 1930s. Using Texas prisons as one base for research, Owens made a trip to Huntsville, Texas, in August 1965, and recorded the songs and story telling of a variety of prison inmates. At the Wynne Farm unit, Owens interviewed and recorded black inmate Dave Tippen, a prisoner the Lomaxes had visited three decades earlier:

on these African-American folk tales. As Abrahams explained:

The toast is a narrative poem that is recited often in a theatrical manner...Toasts are often long, lasting anywhere from two to ten minutes. They conform to a general but by no means binding framing pattern. This consists of some sort of picturesque or exciting introduction, action alternating with dialogue (because the action is usually a struggle between two people or animals), and a twist ending of some sort, either a quip, an ironic comment, or a brag...Toasts are not sung, and it is perhaps the lack of reliance on the structure of a tune that allows their freedom of form.<sup>49</sup>

Owens recorded many such toasts during his sessions with Texas prisoners, including one poem, "Signifying Monkey," which Abrahams analyzed in his book.

While at the Texas prison units, Owens also recorded the songs of Mexican-American inmates, including some instrumental tunes and others with Spanish lyrics. In addition, he recorded such Anglo-American folk songs as "Froggie Went a Courtin'" and "Comin' Round the Mountain." In some cases the inmates sang *acapella*, although they also had guitars, a variety

of rhythm instruments, and even snare drums and accordions. During the two days Owens spent at the Texas prison units, he recorded approximately one hundred songs, along with other material, the bulk of which documented the music of the black inmates.<sup>50</sup>

In his quest to document regional folk music, Owens visited many other locations, as well. In August 1965, he attended the annual fiddle contest in Burnet, Texas, and recorded numerous musicians in what was then the third year of the event. Contestants included eighty-six year old M.T. Mitchell from Akemy, Texas, champion fiddler Benny Thompson from Dallas, who won the competition in 1965, and eleven year old Eddie Davis from Grand Prairie. Louis Franklin and his twelve-year-old son Larry were also competitors. Owens commented on that recording session:

Burnet, Texas, was hosting the world's champion old-time fiddling contest. I recorded that whole event. The players are now all legends. The Franklin Family were a family of fiddlers and they were all champions at one time or another. Louis Franklin was the current champion then in '63 or '64 when I recorded him...and the twelve year old son had entered the contest and he is now the number one fiddle player in Nashville.<sup>51</sup>

Another musician that Owens recorded was Bill Neely, whom Owens had met at Threadgills. Neely was a country blues guitarist who moved to Austin in 1949, became friends with Kenneth Threadgill, and began playing at the bar regularly. Neely and Threadgill shared a mutual admiration for Jimmie Rodgers, and often performed his material. Owens recorded Neely with Powell St. John on backup harmonica and John Moyer playing bass. Owens described Neely as one of Austin's first singer-songwriters and the first to write about drug addiction. While Neely did not drink, smoke, or do drugs, he wrote songs about the hard life he had seen growing up during the Depression. Also included in his repertoire were cowboy ballads, popular tunes of the day, and standard blues numbers by such black performers as Blind Lemon Jefferson, from Couchman, Texas. Owens admired Neely's authenticity and his guitar-playing skills. "Bill was one of my guitar teachers, one of my mentors. And I played with him for years in the Threadgill band."<sup>52</sup>

Although the field research accomplished with the Lomax grant included a variety of Texas musical genres, Owens focused mainly on black blues artists. To some degree, Owens followed in the recording footsteps of the Lomaxes, but he also discovered some important "new" talent. Teodar Jackson (pronounced Teole), a black blues fiddler from the St. John's district in Austin, was one such performer, as were fiddlers Tommy Wright

from Luling, and Oscar Nelson from Cameron, accompanied on guitar by his brother Newton. As Owens recalls :

[These players] were...key to the fact that blues was probably first played in Texas on fiddle and the first musicians, the first black musicians, that played for dances and things were fiddlers. Lightnin' Hopkins's...father was a fiddle player. The fiddle tradition was dying off. The last three people that I know of that played, black people that played the fiddle, except for Gatemouth Brown who's always played it, were Tommy Wright, who I recorded, and Teodar, and the Nelson Brothers.<sup>53</sup>

Another influential black musician that Owens documented was guitarist and singer Mance Lipscomb, born in Navasota, Texas, in 1895. Lipscomb, whose father played fiddle, received a guitar from his mother when he was only eleven. He soon began accompanying his father at dances and Saturday night socials. While Lipscomb had contact with a variety of other well-known musicians, he did not record his own music until the 1960s, when he was "discovered" by two white researchers, Chris Strachwitz and Mack McCormick, who recorded Lipscomb for San Francisco-based Arhoolie Records.<sup>54</sup> Owens also included Lipscomb as part of his field study, recording him in Navasota in August 1963 and at several other sessions in 1965, sometimes pairing Lipscomb with other musicians, including Teodar Jackson on fiddle.<sup>55</sup>

Two other Texas musicians whom Owens recorded in the 1960s were "barrelhouse" piano players Robert Shaw and Roosevelt T. Williams, also known as the "Grey Ghost." The barrelhouse piano style, also known as "boogie woogie," is named for the venues in which the sound developed. It was in the lumber camps and sawmills of East Texas at the beginning of the twentieth century that owners built makeshift bars, or "barrel houses," in order to serve the thirsty lumberjacks. Since these bars were made from long planks placed on top of beer and whiskey barrels, the taverns became known as "barrelhouses." Typically, a barrelhouse included a dance floor and a piano placed on a raised platform. "Because the barrelhouses were crowded and noisy, piano players had to develop a hard-driving, rocking rhythm that was loud enough to be heard throughout the tavern. The music they created was an up-tempo, rollicking piano style called 'barrelhouse,' 'fast Texas blues,' or 'boogie woogie,' which was rooted in the basic twelve-bar blues progression, but also included the livelier syncopated flourishes of ragtime and a strong, repeating bass line that helped make it highly danceable."<sup>56</sup>

Both Robert Shaw and Roosevelt Williams were self-taught piano players, who played in a variety of bars throughout Texas, eventually making Austin their home. Mack McCormick



Mance Lipscomb, 1967. Courtesy Burton Wilson.

produced one of Shaw's albums, *Texas Barrelhouse Piano*, in 1963 on the Almanac Book and Recording Company label.<sup>57</sup> The Grey Ghost had made no commercial records, but he had been included in the field recordings completed by William A. Owens in the 1940s.<sup>58</sup>

Other music in Tary Owens's field work included the Freddie King band and jazz recordings completed in October 1965 at the Austin venue, Charlie's Playhouse. Owens also traveled to San Antonio in March 1966 to record Blues Wallace, billed as a one man band. At the Andrus Studios in Houston, Owens recorded several of his musician-songwriter friends from Austin performing original material, including Bob Brown, Ed Guinn, Powell St. John, Wali Stopher, Minor Wilson, and Gary White. While most of the recordings were completed in Texas, Owens did travel to New Orleans to interview and document the music of dobro player Babe Stovall, someone Owens first heard about while recording in Texas prisons. One other notable recording in the field collection is an interview Owens conducted in Houston during the summer of 1965 with his maternal grandfather, John Holly Kelly. The interview concerned Kelly's recollections of his

days as a band drummer on a Mississippi riverboat during the early 1900s.<sup>59</sup>

In addition to making many field recordings, Owens also produced concerts at the Student Union when he first enrolled at the University of Texas. This was part of his larger effort to network with a wide range of musicians and to stay involved in the local music scene. As his former wife, Madeleine Villatoro, recalled:

[Tary] was always out to the clubs and...I was a stay at home, you have to stay home when you have a child, anyway. But I think he was always cultivating his music—finding the people and knowing what was going on in the music scene. Tary was bringing musicians to come and play in Austin at that time too. He actually organized a blues [festival]; he got the musicians he'd found in East Austin to play at the campus.<sup>60</sup>

The first show included musicians Mance Lipscomb, Robert Shaw, and Teodar Jackson. Lipscomb and Shaw were well-

known performers, but this was Jackson's first time to play before a white audience.<sup>61</sup>

In addition to organizing concerts, working toward his degree, and pursuing field work for the grant, Owens took a job during his junior and senior years running the recently launched University Folklore and Oral History Archives. Years later, Owens remembered what an impression it made on him to be given such an important position:

[The University of Texas] sent me up to the University of Indiana to study their folklore archives, how to run a folklore archive...[and the University of Texas] they hired me to be the archivist...[This was] really an honor because I was an undergraduate and here I had...an office in Parnam Hall and a secretary and a phone. And I was in charge of the folklore archives for twenty hours a week while I was finishing my degree.<sup>62</sup>

With an assistant to help him, Owens set about cataloging a variety of folklore materials, including collections from Américo

they had visited for a few weeks during the previous summer, lived in the area called Haight-Ashbury, a focal point for the burgeoning hippie "counter-culture" movement.<sup>64</sup>

Leaders of the counter-culture movement had already declared 1967 to be the "Summer of Love" in San Francisco. Indeed thousands of people from all over the world converged on the city during that summer for music festivals, speeches, anti-war rallies, poetry readings, and "human be-ins." The events that took place in San Francisco that summer would epitomize the spirit of the counter-culture movement and serve as one of the emblematic high points of the 1960s. Ironically, Tary Owens, who had spent most of his life in the rather socially-conservative South and Midwest, suddenly found himself at the epicenter of a cultural revolution that would forever change America and the world.<sup>65</sup>

Another pair of friends that the Owenses knew from Austin were now living just north of San Francisco in the coastal town of Gualala. Since this couple also had a small child, Madeleine and Willie stayed with them through the summer, while Tary remained in San Francisco with Minor Wilson and his wife and tried to find paying jobs for the Southern Flyers. By summer's

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Paredes. While Owens did manage to catalog part of his own field recordings before he graduated in 1967, he discovered several years later that some of his material was not archived properly, particularly the oral interviews. Fortunately, he had made backup copies that he retained as part of his personal collection.<sup>63</sup>

After completing his undergraduate coursework in English and anthropology, Owens chose not to enroll in graduate school. He enjoyed the folklore work but wanted to see what he could do with his own musical career. He had organized a five-member band called the Southern Flyers, which included singer Angela Strehli, two guitarists, a drummer, and Owens singing and playing bass. When he suggested that the band make a move to California to pursue "fame and fortune," three of the members, including Strehli, agreed. In the summer of 1967, Tary and Madeleine Owens, along with their young son Willie, headed west in a new car pulling a small trailer packed with everything they owned. Although they had no idea where they would stay, they did have a few friends from Austin already living in the San Francisco area. Minor Wilson and his wife Mary Ann had a flat on Beaver Street and, of course, Janis Joplin, whom

end, Madeleine and Willie moved into the Wilson's flat on Beaver Street in San Francisco where Tary had been staying. There were several other people living there by then, including former Austinite and Ghetto resident Powell St. John. Eventually the Wilsons moved out, and the Owenses took over the lease. Ultimately the house became home to many of their friends and a sort of "way station" for the comings and goings of many young people who migrated to San Francisco.<sup>66</sup>

Owens had almost no luck finding paying gigs for the Southern Flyers, so the band soon dissolved. Some of the members returned to Texas, but the Owenses would remain in San Francisco for nearly eight years, while Tary continued to pursue a music career. He organized another group, the Pure Funk Rock Band, which included Peter Auschlin on drums and guitarists Jamie Howell and Stan Portyes.<sup>67</sup> Owens also hung out with a growing number of Texas musicians who had relocated to the San Francisco area, including Boz Scaggs, Doug Sahm, and Mother Earth, featuring Tracy Nelson.<sup>68</sup>

The dynamic music scene in and around San Francisco during the late 1960s owed much to the creative vision and

talent of producer and promoter, Chet Helms, whom Tary Owens knew from Austin. Helms was born in Santa Maria, California, in 1942, but, when he was nine years old, moved to Texas with his mother and two brothers following the death of their father. Helms attended the University of Texas, where he befriended Owens, Janis Joplin, and the other Ghetto regulars, but dropped out in 1962 and moved back to California, settling in San Francisco. Drawing on the local music scene, Helms put together informal jam sessions, from which the band Big Brother and the Holding Company evolved. In 1963, Helms made a brief trip back to Austin and persuaded Joplin to come out to San Francisco. He promised her that he would help promote her musical career, later making her the lead singer for Big Brother and the Holding Company.<sup>69</sup>

Chet Helms also owned the Avalon Ballroom, located in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood. The Avalon hosted several of the most popular “psychedelic” rock bands of the 1960s, including the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, Country Joe & the Fish, and Big Brother and the Holding Company. Fortunately, for Tary and Madeleine Owens, who had almost no money, Helms helped them get into many musical events for free.<sup>70</sup>

The communal living situation at the house on Beaver Street

care of Willie. Tary did the cooking for Madeleine during this time and generally helped out during her recovery. Madeleine came to realize, however, that their life style and marriage were not working out:

That was kind of like the turning point for me, as far as the whole drug scene. I think I realized that this was over for me. [If Tary] had other girlfriends, he never let me in on that. He never mistreated me; it was just the free love time...And I think, by that time, the alcohol was an issue, but I never knew that it was. And as far as the drug thing—we never thought of it as being addicted...the heroin I knew to stay away from, but I think Tary, because he was around so many people, he just succumbed to it. And I think that was really the thing that caused our marriage to break up.<sup>72</sup>

At that time Madeleine was not aware of how serious her husband’s addictions to alcohol and drugs had become. Tary himself was in denial. By 1969, Madeleine had fallen in love with another man, which she believes was in some respects a

## Tary Owens became increasingly involved with drugs. Hanging around with Janis Joplin and her friends, he started snorting heroin and eventually injecting.

eventually came to an end in 1969 when a fire and explosion put all the residents out on the street. Madeleine recounted the experience and the subsequent move to another residence:

I remember someone knocking on the door and saying “Wake up, the house is on fire,” and we all just piled out and went across the street...the firemen came and we heard an explosion and the whole back side of the house blew off...of course we didn’t have a place to live anymore...Tary wasn’t there either that night. He was over in Berkeley. I don’t know if he was playing music or seeing music, but he wasn’t there. Or he may have gone to Texas for all I know...I remember we got moved to this other place [on 23rd Street] and of course he didn’t know.<sup>71</sup>

Shortly after the move to 23rd Street, Madeleine became physically rundown and was eventually diagnosed with pneumonia. The doctor suggested at least three months of bed rest, which she accomplished with the help of a friend who took

way to get out of a situation she did not know how to control. Ultimately, Madeleine obtained a divorce from Tary in absentia, because he had temporarily gone to Texas and could not be located to be served divorce papers.<sup>73</sup>

Back in California following the divorce, Tary Owens became increasingly involved with drugs. Hanging around with Janis Joplin and her friends, he started snorting heroin and eventually injecting it. Ironically, Joplin, a heroin user herself, tried to discourage Owens from using the drug, but he was already on his way to an addiction he could not control. Owens remembered that the last time he saw Joplin alive in the summer of 1970 was at a party at her house in San Francisco:

Kris Kristofferson was there. It was right before our high school reunion in Port Arthur, and Janis offered to pay my way to go with her. But I was strung out, afraid to go. I knew Janis could buy her way out of any trouble down there, but I couldn’t. I don’t think I ever saw her again after that, though we did talk on the phone many more times.<sup>74</sup>

Owens could not remember exactly where he was on October 4, 1970, the day Joplin died from a heroin overdose, but even her tragic death could not convince him to quit drugs. “I was so into my downward thing that I didn’t feel a lot of pain about it. By that time, I was feeling so hopeless that there was no jolt that could stop me.”<sup>75</sup>

Not long after Joplin’s death, Owens came back to Austin for a while, bunking with friends. In 1971, he made a trip to Navasota in East Texas to visit his friend, bluesman Mance Lipscomb. In need of money and high on drugs, Owens stole a guitar given to Lipscomb by the Gibson Company. The theft

didn’t think he had the right to live longer than Hank Williams...a few years later he put out what I think is his best album, for Tomato Records; it was a double, “The Late Great Townes Van Zandt.” [That] was 15 years before he died.<sup>78</sup>

Owens was closer friends with Guy Clark during those Houston days, in part because Clark and Owens’s friend, Minor Wilson, owned a local guitar repair shop during the 1970s. Although born in West Texas, Guy Clark had based himself in Houston for a while and played regularly at a club called Jesters,

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landed Owens in jail for seven weeks in the East Texas town of Anderson, where he was forced to kick the heroin habit “cold turkey.” Owens remembers that as a terrible time, filled with hallucinations and seizures. Despite the difficulties of kicking heroin, Owens did emerge from jail clean and sober, at least for a brief time. He quickly left for Houston to look for work and to try and get back into the music scene.<sup>76</sup>

Owens found a job as music editor and distribution manager for *The Space City News*, a small alternative newspaper in Houston. Hanging out in various live music venues around Houston, Owens became friends with several Texas musicians who frequented these clubs. He was also hired to play at one particular place, the Old Quarter, a folk club on Congress Avenue:

Townes [Van Zandt], it was kind of his home away from home. It was run by Rex Bell...and...just about any weekend night you would hear Guy Clark or Townes or any of the people that are now...followers of Townes and Guy. And I played there pretty regularly, as well. We had some times going up on the roof of the place. There were a lot of drugs then.<sup>77</sup>

Owens met Townes Van Zandt for the first time in Austin in the early 1960s. By the early 1970s, Van Zandt was living in Houston part-time while not on tour. Owens remembered that Van Zandt had just come back to town and promptly overdosed on heroin. Owens saw him for the first time in Houston when he went to visit Van Zandt in the hospital:

[The doctors] had knocked out his front tooth to get a breathing tube down him...he did everything he could to die before he was twenty-nine. He

located on Westheimer Boulevard. Owens recalled the Houston music scene at the time:

[Jesters] that’s where I played my first gig in Houston, opening for John Denver when he was first getting started. He’d just left the Chad Mitchell Trio and was just going out on his own. He’d just changed his name from Dusseldorf to Denver...there was that whole folk scene in Texas—Michael Murphy, Segle Fry—they had a band called the Dallas Jug Band. It was one of the first folk groups in Texas...there was the Cellar in Fort Worth...it was a place to play for all of us. My first paid gig [had been] at the Cellar in San Antonio in 1962.<sup>79</sup>

By the fall of 1972, Tary Owens was back in Austin. One of the jobs he took during this time was staging rock and roll concerts to publicize George McGovern’s presidential campaign. Although he admits that drug use has hindered his ability to recall the details of that period, Owens believes that he met future president Bill Clinton, who worked on McGovern’s campaign in Texas, and that Clinton possibly hired Owens to produce some concerts.<sup>80</sup>

Over the next several years, Owens moved around the country. He lived again in California for a while, both in San Francisco and in Lake Tahoe, where he worked as a bartender for the Hyatt Hotel. He organized a band there, called the TK Owens Blues Band, but he mainly made his living from bartending:

My first bartending job was at Lake Tahoe. My girlfriend in San Francisco was a blues guitarist herself, named Debbie Olcesi, a Sicilian name. She

had a band named Ascension, all women...she and I were engaged to get married...and she had an uncle that was the beverage manager for the Hyatt Hotel system...She came to Texas with me when I came back in 1976, but she didn't stay. I had a serious drug problem that got in the way of everything.<sup>81</sup>

Owens moved to Denton, Texas, where he lived for about three years from 1976 until 1979, working at Timatao's, a Mexican restaurant owned by his brothers Ben and Tim Owens. Tary organized a band called Living Proof, which provided some income, and he also played at a several clubs in Fort Worth, including the Bluebird Lounge, owned by Texas blues artist, Robert Ealey. Owens would occasionally sit in with a Fort Worth band, the Juke Jumpers, headed by Sumter Bruton, guitarist Stephen Bruton's older brother.<sup>82</sup>

By 1979, Owens decided to leave Texas, believing that he needed a change of environment in one of his attempts to go straight and kick his drug habit. His friend from Port Arthur, Jim Langdon, lived in New Orleans and worked as a journalist with the *Times-Picayune*. Langdon remembered the phone conversation with Owens about relocating to New Orleans:

[I told Tary] if you're looking for a change of environment in order to stay straight, this is the last place on earth you should come...Tary already had a drug history—a significant one. All those friends in San Francisco...[Tary] was absolutely... on the bottom of their list, because he had stolen things from people...I had no personal experience with any of that, but I had heard from friends that I trusted and believed that indeed he had done all of these things. I found it hard to believe, but I knew they weren't lying about it...[I decided that] I'd give him a chance.<sup>83</sup>

Langdon's roommate also agreed to let Owens come live with them in New Orleans. "So he came and moved in. We had a room for him and didn't require any rent initially," Langdon recalled. Before too long, Owens got in touch with Dr. Bill Malone, formerly a fellow musician at Threadgill's in Austin and now a professor at Tulane University in New Orleans. Langdon recounted that time:

[Malone] was putting on some kind of program at Tulane, doing some kind of folk talk and singing and hired Tary to play with him. So I thought that was terrific that he had already found a connection there and was actually going to pick up a few bucks. So it made me think it was going to go alright. Then one

night, I think it was the night after the concert, he didn't come home. And we didn't see him for two or three days... [Tary] fell off the wagon big time.<sup>84</sup>

A very angry Langdon demanded that Owens move out after they caught him trying to steal the roommate's wallet. "I guess that's the closest I ever came to killing anybody in my life," Langdon recalled, and added that, "I didn't have any contact with Tary for years after that incident." Owens lived in New Orleans for another year, supporting himself by playing in a band called the Radiators. Judy Ryan, a girlfriend from his Denton days, came to live with Owens in New Orleans during part of that year, but by 1980 Owens had made the decision to return to Texas.<sup>85</sup>

The nearly twenty years of drug and alcohol abuse had taken their toll on Owens's health, both physical and mental, and clearly on his personal relationships. Owens could no longer deny that his substance abuse was out of control. Years later, he reflected on that period in his life. "There was a long time that I didn't care if I lived or died. I think I would have even welcomed death. It meant the end, the end of pain. But something finally came to me—that I didn't want to die like that. I didn't want to drown in a dumpster."<sup>86</sup> Following a long period of deep soul-searching and a realization of just how far down he had come, Owens decided to seek professional help to get clean and sober once and for all.

By the time Tary Owens returned to Texas in the early 1980s, he had decided that he needed to seek professional help in order to end his addiction to alcohol and drugs. Owens began treatment for addiction at the state hospital in Wichita Falls before returning to Austin in 1982, where he continued to recover. For Owens, part of his effort to stay clean and sober would involve working as a drug and alcohol counselor himself after he earned his Licensed Chemical Dependency Counselor degree at Austin Community College. Although Austin already had several Alcoholics Anonymous groups, it had no Narcotics Anonymous organizations, so Owens helped form the first such group.<sup>87</sup>

Over the next several years, Owens also pursued certification as an HIV counselor. He was a founding member of the A.I.D.S. Committee for the National Association of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Counselors, and he chaired the A.I.D.S. Task Force for the Texas Association of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Counselors from 1989-1991. As chairman of the Texas task force, Owens worked to develop a standard HIV curriculum for chemical dependency counselors in the state. He traveled throughout Texas and the nation giving presentations at professional conferences and for health related organizations, including the Center for Disease Control, the Betty Ford Center, the Texas Department of Health, and the Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse. In 1988, Owens took a position as Outreach Supervisor



Roosevelt T. Williams, 'The Grey Ghost,' and his dog Mike. Courtesy Clay Shorkey and the Texas Music Museum.

for C.A.R.E., a community-based agency that provides HIV and drug and alcohol prevention, education, and counseling to high-risk populations within Travis County. As a recovering alcoholic and drug abuser himself, Owens could speak from personal experience, as he worked with addicts at public and private treatment centers, jails, and other agencies.<sup>88</sup>

The various counseling jobs Owens took provided a steady income and helped reinforce his own commitment to staying sober. His brother Tim reflected on what Tary's recovery meant to the Owens Family and to Tary's friends:

[After] Tary got into the right program...[he] never really got back into the despair of being a junkie... When he got his one year pin, he came to Houston and gave it to my Dad. And...that's when my Dad stopped drinking. If Tary can do it, Dad said he'd do it, too...[and Tary] went back and apologized

to everybody. He re-established contact through the 12-step program. He wasn't ever able to make financial restitution. Most of the cost was on himself. He hurt himself more than he hurt anyone else. Do what you can. Not everyone is going to forgive you, but in most cases people did forgive Tary.<sup>89</sup>

Owens knew that drinking and drugs had hindered his success in the music business. However, as he began the long road to recovery in 1983, he was focused on staying drug and alcohol-free and paid little attention to musical matters. I "started my life again and I didn't think about the music or the recordings I'd made." That would change in 1986, when Owens wandered into the Barker Texas History Center, now known as the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas-Austin. It was there that he toured an exhibit titled, "From Lemon to Lightnin': Texas Blues," which featured several of the

recordings Owens had made in the 1960s, including those of barrelhouse piano player Roosevelt T. Williams, also known as the Grey Ghost.<sup>90</sup>

Born in Bastrop, Texas, on December 7, 1903, Roosevelt Williams spent his youth in Taylor, which was a major cotton and rail shipping center during the early 1900s. As a young man, Williams attended school and worked in the cotton fields by day. At night, he was drawn to the music he heard coming from the local juke joints, which, at the time, he was too young to enter. Williams absorbed a variety of musical influences and spent many hours at the home of a friend who owned a piano, “picking out melodies he’d heard, teaching himself everything he’d ever need to know. The cross-pollination of African-American, Mexican, Anglo, German, Czech, and French traditions found throughout the Lone Star State contributed to the unique musical style which the Grey Ghost would later call his own.”<sup>91</sup>

From the 1920s to the 1940s, Williams lived a nomadic lifestyle, riding freight trains around Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and New Mexico. He followed the cotton harvests, entertaining black migrant workers and performing at house parties, medicine shows, carnivals, juke joints, and barrelhouses. Because his playing style reflected the influence of jazz greats such as Charlie Dillard, Earl “Fatha” Hines, and Count Basie, some people referred to Williams as the “Thelonius Monk of blues players.” It was his habit of appearing, as if from nowhere, to perform and then disappearing just as suddenly that earned Williams the nickname “Grey Ghost.” By the late 1940s, Williams had settled in Austin, taking a job as a bus driver for the Austin Independent School District, which he held until his retirement in 1965. During those years, he continued to play at local clubs, such as Fat Green’s and the legendary Victory Grill, a “showplace for blues players” in East Austin.<sup>92</sup>

Owens had first heard about the Grey Ghost and several other Austin-area musicians during the mid-1960s from barrelhouse piano player, Robert Shaw, whom Owens met through the Texas Union Folk Series concerts at the University of Texas. When Owens’s friends Mack McCormick and Chris Strachwitz launched Arhoolie Records in 1960, Shaw’s recordings were some of the first that the fledgling label released. Owens recalled how Shaw would later provide valuable assistance in his field research:

Mr. Shaw was really gracious to me, and he was my first source of musicians to go to...He gave me several names of piano players and guitar players and other musicians...[He] gave me an introduction into that whole community...He also led me to Lavada Durst, [who] recorded gospel songs and had written one big gospel music hit in the 50s called, “Let’s Talk About Jesus,” that was a million seller

in the gospel field. And [Shaw] gave me...names of other musicians...like Boot Walden, Baby Dotson who were piano players who’d passed on. And he said, now...there’s Grey Ghost [and] he gave me Ghost’s address...Grey Ghost was a real exciting find for me, because he had a huge repertoire.<sup>93</sup>

Owens was thrilled to find Grey Ghost featured in the 1986 music exhibit, along with some of the other musicians with whom he had recorded twenty years earlier. As Owens said:

There was another folklorist in between the Lomaxes and me...[In the 1940s, William A. Owens] recorded this itinerant piano player, the Grey Ghost, and then I recorded him again in 1965... at this exhibit they had one whole display of the Grey Ghost...[but] they thought he was dead...I knew he was alive...I had seen him in Austin on the street. And so I decided I wanted to find him and let him see this exhibit...[see] that his music was being preserved, and that he was considered important.<sup>94</sup>

Finding Grey Ghost turned out to be the easy part. He lived right next door to where he had stayed in the 1960s when Owens first met him, a home on East 11th Street near Interstate-35. However, Williams had no interest in going to the exhibit at the Barker Center. According to Owens, Grey Ghost, then in his eighties, said, “I’m sick and I’m tired and you know my life—that’s all over and in the past. I don’t want to talk about it.”<sup>95</sup>

Knowing that the exhibit would not be at the Barker Center indefinitely, Owens refused to give up on Williams. As Owens later recalled, “after going day after day after day, I finally...and mostly I think to get rid of me, [Williams] agreed to go with me.” According to Owens the visit to the exhibit turned out to be gratifying for Grey Ghost after all:

We went across [the highway] to the Barker History Center and saw [the exhibit] and he was just astounded...He kind of vaguely remembered recording and vaguely remembered me...but he never thought anything of it...I wanted him to hear his own music; it was real exciting. And it was real exciting for everybody there for him to be rediscovered...the Texas Music Museum folks wanted him to play in a concert right away.<sup>96</sup>

Heartened by the enthusiasm and recognition of his music that the exhibit generated, Williams agreed to allow Owens to book several concerts for him. Owens recounted the events:

He was eighty-four years old at the time, and he did two or three concerts, and it looked like he was going to have another career going again...He started playing, and I was his manager and traveled with him. We went to New Orleans to the jazz festival, the Chicago Blues Festival... out to San Francisco, played all over. He wouldn't get on an airplane...[So] anywhere we could go either in the car or by train, we traveled [there].<sup>97</sup>

For Owens, this venture back into the music business included fulfilling his long-held dream of owning a record company. In 1987, Owens partnered with his son, Willie Owens, and an old friend, Julie Howell, to found Catfish Records, which would specialize in Texas and Southern music. Owens resurrected the field recordings he had made of Williams back in the 1960s and produced Catfish Record's first release, *The Grey Ghost*. The album spanned Grey Ghost's career from the 1920s to the 1980s and included a variety of styles, ranging from barrelhouse piano and minstrel music to pop and jazz, all of which reflected

Bowser and T.D. Bell, both native Texas bluesmen who had met while working in the West Texas oilfields during the late 1940s. With Bowser on piano and Bell on guitar, the two began playing together at nightclubs in West Texas and New Mexico. By the 1950s, they had moved to Austin, renewed their musical partnership, and frequently performed with the Grey Ghost, playing at such local venues as the Club Petit, Charlie's Playhouse, and the Victory Grill, owned by Johnny Holmes.<sup>99</sup>

Holmes, a musician, booking agent, and band manager, "opened the Victory Grill on 'Victory over Japan' Day in 1945 as a restaurant and bar for black soldiers returning from the war. In the segregated South of the 1940s, these servicemen could not walk into just any place to have a beer." The East Austin club soon became a well-known venue for Texas blues, rhythm and blues, and jazz performers, as well as national touring acts, including Ike and Tina Turner, James Brown, Billie Holiday, B.B. King, Chuck Berry, and a young Janis Joplin. Located at 1104 East 11th Street, the club was on the "Chitlin' Circuit," a network of African-American clubs throughout the South in which black musicians could perform without fear of racial

## On October 16, 1998, the Victory Grill was added to the National Register of Historic Places.

Williams's wide-ranging talent and eclectic musical sensibilities. Although Williams had been playing piano since he was a teenager and performing for most of his life, this 1987 Catfish Records release was his first commercial recording.<sup>98</sup>

From his relationship with Williams, Owens soon found additional opportunities to record and manage other musicians from throughout Central Texas. Before long, Owens released more recordings on the Catfish label, including some by Erbie



Robert Shaw, 1971. Courtesy Burton Wilson.

discrimination. During the Victory Grill's heyday of the 1950s and 1960s, music fans representing all races packed into the club. As one East Austin resident observed, "The street was so crowded you could barely walk. It was like New Orleans."<sup>100</sup>

By the 1970s, Holmes closed the nightclub portion of the Victory Grill because of declining attendance and the general deterioration of the East Austin neighborhood. Two main factors contributed to this decline. Many affluent blacks moved to the suburbs as integration promoted more social mobility. Desegregation also opened the doors to black performers at formerly all-white venues and the need for a "Chitlin' Circuit" ceased to exist. As Owens began to work with many of the blues musicians who had performed at the Victory Grill, he wanted to bring attention not only to their music, but also to the importance of the club in Texas music history. In the summer of 1987 and coinciding with the state holiday, "Juneteenth" (which honors the June 19, 1865 emancipation of slaves in Texas), Owens staged the "Texas Blues Reunion" at the Victory Grill. The event brought musicians and fans together for a music-filled weekend. This historic Austin "juke joint" closed for a period of time after a 1988 fire damaged part of the structure. Various fundraisers and restoration efforts over the years finally resulted in its reopening in 1996. On October 16, 1998, the Victory Grill was added to the National Register of Historic Places.<sup>101</sup>



The Victory Grill in Austin, circa 1945. Courtesy Tary Owens and the Texas Music Museum.

Over the next several years, Tary Owens continued his work in addiction counseling, but he also remained involved with music promotion, production, and management. The second release for Catfish Records in 1989, *Texas Piano Professors*, spotlighted the talents of three Austin barrelhouse piano players and long-time friends—Erbie Bowser, Lavada Durst, and Grey Ghost.<sup>102</sup> Lavada Durst, a native of Austin, was born on January 9, 1913. Like many musicians of his generation, he taught himself to play piano, and “became a master at playing 1930s and 1940s ‘barrelhouse’ blues.” Hired by Austin’s KVET radio in 1948, Durst, aka “Dr. Hepcat,” became the first black disc jockey in Texas. In 1955, he was inducted into “the unofficial Rock Radio Hall of Fame.”<sup>103</sup> Owens also produced Alfred “Snuff” Johnson, an Austin-based country blues guitarist and long-time friend of the “Piano Professors.”<sup>104</sup> Owens always tried to make sure that the musicians who recorded for him were paid well. Although many black artists had been exploited by the recording industry, Owens had a different ethic:

When I started managing [Grey Ghost] I made sure that he got good money on everything that came out on the market under his name. Got him \$5,000 for that first album, which is \$4,000 above market value at that time. Most musicians were getting paid \$1,000 to do a record...got him \$5,000 for the next record, too...that was Erbie and him [Grey Ghost] and Lavada Durst...each of them got \$5,000 for [*Texas Piano Professors*].<sup>105</sup>

Because of his close ties to Janis Joplin and his participation in the evolving Austin music scene of the 1960s, journalists

<http://ecommons.txstate.edu/jtmh/vol9/iss1/3>

and film producers frequently sought out Owens for his first-hand perspective on that era. Such was the case when two of his friends, Martha Hertzog and Paul Congo, asked Owens to be a consultant on some documentary films they were producing about the Austin blues scene. Owens eventually became their partner and co-producer on three documentary films. One hour-long film, *A Tribute to Robert Shaw*, was produced in 1986 for the Black Arts Alliance of Austin. Another film documented the 1989 “Texas Blues Reunion” gathering at the Victory Grill, an event that Owens had produced. The third documentary focused on Grey Ghost, although only a rough copy of the video was ever completed.<sup>106</sup>

The years Owens had spent addicted to alcohol and drugs certainly took a toll on his professional career and his personal life, resulting in failed marriages and many strained relationships. However, all of this began to change in the mid-1980s, as Owens conquered his addictions and started a successful career in the music business. His life took another positive turn in the early 1990s, when a mutual friend introduced Owens to Maryann Price, a Rhode Island-born singer and musician who moved to Austin in 1988. Price and her friend Chris O’Connell were singing at an Austin farmer’s market one Saturday morning, and Owens happened to be there shopping. According to Price, “he was shopping for bananas, no it was tomatoes. And he got a tomato alright—it was me!” The two had first crossed paths in California in the late 1960s while both were living in San Francisco. Price sang with a popular West Coast band, Dan Hicks and His Hot Licks. She recalled her time in California:

I didn’t go out there until 1969. I was too late for everything. I sang at the “Summer of Love” reunion

with Dan Hicks and Naomi [Eisenberg]...when I got there, the Haight was all boarded up; I mean all the little coffee shops and the head shops were all like these Texas towns. It looked like downtown Shamrock. Nothing happening. Clapboard all over the windows and the stores. And I thought, I didn't come out here for this. But then the 1970s really needed help musically. And I'm glad I was there to give it a little infusion from Las Vegas.<sup>107</sup>

While living in San Francisco, Owens had seen Price perform. When the couple was introduced, he knew who she was, but Price did not remember Owens:

[Tary] had heard recordings that we were making, because there was a pretty big splash with the Hot Licks. We were on the cover of the *Rolling Stone*... twice or three times...a lot of people really loved that band and still do...Tary knew of me from that. Now I of him, I didn't know the name, but when he would tell me the bands that he played in...I recognized the names of the bands.<sup>108</sup>

Having mutual interests, talents, and friends, Owens and Price soon began their relationship, which was tested early on. Price recalled that "Tary and I were just getting together in 1993, maybe 1994 at the latest. And so we took a trip in the car, which is the ultimate test—four cylinders, and Tary, and me, and the car." They drove up the East Coast through the Carolinas, Virginia, and Maryland, where Price spent many summers as a young girl. They were heading to Maine where Price's mother lived, but they stopped in New York City so Owens could visit his friend, Myra Friedman. Friedman was the author of *Buried Alive: The Intimate Biography of Janis Joplin*, for which Owens had contributed background information. After several days in Maine, Owens and Price drove to Montréal, Canada, and then south through Michigan to Grand Tower, Illinois, where Owens spent his early years. Price remembered the trip:

We both showed each other where we were brought up...It was a very nice way to get started with the relationship. I saw all of Grand Tower from the house that he lived in...the guy that [now] lived there...had found a marble in the backyard that had been one of Tary's rare marbles...And he gave this marble to Tary...so Tary was thrilled by that. And then we camped out near there. Very romantic...had a great time.<sup>109</sup>

As they crossed back into Texas, Owens decided to stop in Crockett, where they roamed into an antique store and learned

that it had once been the Jolly Joy Club, a popular blues venue. Owens asked the lady running the store if there were any musicians still around the Crockett area. According to Owens she said, "Well, there's Frank Robinson, and there's Reverend Cooper, but he...plays Christian music now, and then there's Ervin Charles...and [Curtis] Guitar Colter." Delighted to still be "discovering" veteran Texas blues players as late as the 1990s, Owens decided to try and meet some of these local musicians.<sup>110</sup> For Price, conducting field studies, stopping to research the local music scene, and searching out musicians was a totally new experience. She remembered that first trip to Crockett:

So we pulled in and I said, oh look, a junk store...So we walked in, and I know Tary was dragging his feet a little behind me. There was a black woman sitting at the cashier desk there. And he kind of brightened up when he saw that black people ran it. And while I was over looking [around]...he's up at the front talking with the black woman...I could hear him talking, "Ma'am do you know of any musicians that play locally, here at Crockett, that you might tell us about?"...And she started rattling off these names...This was a treasure trove. We had walked into this place...that had turned out [to be] this jewelry box full of goodies.<sup>111</sup>

Before they left Crockett that day, Owens and Price went over to Frank Robinson's house, introduced themselves, and sat down for a visit with the musician and his wife. As it turned out, Robinson was the nephew of famed Texas guitarist, Lightnin' Hopkins. On subsequent trips to Crockett, Owens persuaded Robinson, Colter, and Charles to come to Austin for a recording session, which resulted in the 1997 album, *Deep East Texas Blues*. Price remembered that Robinson and the other musicians who recorded the album were very suspicious at first:

They came down here, but they couldn't believe that they were finally going to be on a record. This was like heaven to them. Best thing that ever happened to them. Tary Owens—one of the white guys that they thought might cheat them. [They recorded] here in Austin at the old Lone Star Studios where Tary was a partner at the time, and man this was a real studio with glass...Jim Watts engineered it; I was there...[and] I played brushes on several of the tunes with Frank.<sup>113</sup>

Sometime after Owens and Price began their relationship, they purchased a house in East Austin located on the banks of the Colorado River. The large brick house had plenty of room for the musical instruments, recording equipment, assorted memorabilia, and archival materials that the two of them

had accumulated during their lengthy careers. A large porch stretched across the entire back length of the house where they could sit and look out at the river. Part of the appeal of this location for Owens was how much the place reminded him of his boyhood days growing up in Illinois along the banks of the Mississippi River. The couple married on May 17, 1997, at a ceremony held in their backyard, with friends and family there for the festivities. The Reverend Slim Richey, also a musician, officiated at the wedding.<sup>114</sup>

Their East Austin home became a gathering place for an annual party of Owens's old friends from the Ghetto days of the 1960s, along with music colleagues and other Austin friends the couple had met over the years. With Price's assistance, Owens continued his work helping drug addicts. "We were both involved in recovery," Owens said, "helping other musicians get over drugs and alcohol; and I became the guy to look up if somebody was a musician and had a problem. Maryann and I were the people who could help them get help."<sup>115</sup> During this time Owens and Price opened their home to many musicians and artists seeking "a place of sanctuary and peace."<sup>116</sup>

Owens and Price continued to pursue their separate musical careers, but they also sometimes performed together as Mary

of Long John Hunter, Phillip Walker, Lonnie Brooks, and Ervin Charles. Another 1999 release, a self-produced sampler album, *Catfish, Carp & Diamonds: 35 Years of Texas Blues*, contained a selection of some of the best of Owens's 1960s field recordings.<sup>120</sup> Owens once compared those field recordings to the carp, a fish not generally appreciated by Americans, but highly prized in other parts of the world. "Much of the music I've recorded is like that," he said. "It's not going to make the Top 40. But it's music that is real and true, and speaks to the human heart."<sup>121</sup> Yet another historical compilation album, *Ruff Stuff: The Roots of Texas Blues Guitar*, featured, among other artists, the music of Owens's guitar mentors Mance Lipscomb and Bill Neely.

Jonathan Foose, a production partner of Owens, assisted on some of these releases, as well as on the recordings of such diverse musicians as San Antonio violin virtuoso, Sebastian Campesi, and bluesman, Long John Hunter. Foose commented on Owens's work as a record producer. "Tary's talent, his spark—he could find people, dig them out of the woodwork. He would try anything in the studio." Foose observed that Owens brought together the very best musicians for studio work, combining instrumentation in very inventive ways.<sup>123</sup> Through all of the recordings Owens produced, he not only documented the

## Their East Austin home became a gathering place for an annual party of Owens's old friends from the Ghetto days of the 1960s.

and Tary. Price's vocal techniques blend "western swing, jazz, studio pop and boogie-woogie" exhibiting the wide range of her talent. Following her stint with Dan Hicks out in California, Price moved to England in 1973 and sang with the Kinks for one year.<sup>117</sup> Moving back to the United States, she toured for some time as a vocalist with Ray Benson's western swing band, Asleep at the Wheel. After settling in Austin, Price performed at local venues and other music events around the country. She also gave private voice lessons in her home. Although Owens's musical style and background differed from Price's, the two drew on each other's strengths. "We've both been inducted into the Texas Music Hall of Fame," said Owens. "We're the only couple, and we were nominated completely separately. It wasn't anything we did together that got us into the Hall of Fame...totally separate careers, but now we're [performing] together."<sup>118</sup>

Throughout the 1990s, Owens continued recording and managing the careers of many of the blues musicians he had met through his connections with Grey Ghost, as well as from his own ongoing search for "forgotten" roots musicians. Over the years Owens "produced about thirty to forty CDs of all kinds of blues and Texas music in general."<sup>119</sup> One such record was the critically-acclaimed 1999 release, *Lone Star Shootout*, showcasing the talents

music of these artists but also helped revive their performing careers by getting them booked at concerts and festivals across North America and Europe.<sup>124</sup>

Part of managing the careers of these musicians involved helping them gain wider public recognition for their artistry. To that end, Owens booked them into music clubs in Austin and throughout the country. In addition to the various blues festivals in Texas, such as the East Texas Blues Festival held every summer in Navasota, Owens booked concerts for some of these Texas artists at Carnegie Hall in New York City and at a variety of European festivals. Owens recalled the international tours:

The first year over there was...1992, I guess. I took T.D. and Erbie over there as a duo. And then came back the next year with them and their big band. And then subsequent trips with Frank Robinson and Guitar Curtis. [And] Snuff [Johnson] went over there. [Grey Ghost never went and]...neither did Lavada Durst. [Grey Ghost]...wouldn't fly. They would have loved him over there...The last time I went to Europe...was in 1999...I went over with Blues Boy Hubbard and the Jets and...with Spot Barnett and

Doug Sahm...I took [Sahm] to Europe on the last trip...He died later that year [in November].<sup>125</sup>

Tim Owens remembered his brother's traveling around the United States and to Europe and remarked that, "Tary got a lot out of it and those old guys got a ton out of it. It was the highlight of their whole lives to go to Europe to play for blues festivals or Carnegie Hall. And then as those people's health failed, Tary was kind of the care giver, [particularly] for the Ghost."<sup>126</sup>

The relationship Tary Owens had with the Grey Ghost was more than simply as a professional music manager and producer. From 1986, when Owens reintroduced himself to Williams at the old musician's home on East 11th Street, until Grey Ghost's death on July 19, 1996, their relationship grew increasingly close. Owens said, "I took care of him like he was my grandfather for the rest of his life."<sup>127</sup> He helped launch the Grey Ghost on a whole new career by arranging concert performances, traveling with him around the country to music festivals, producing his records, and helping manage his finances. Price commented on her husband's relationship with Grey Ghost:

Tary started to create booking dates, music jobs for him. Asked him if he wanted to play at Antone's happy hour, or the Continental Club—he got a gig [there] every single Monday night for years...He celebrated his last birthday at the Continental...Tary...made sure that the owner of the Continental understood who this man was and what a treasure he is; [the club owner] hired him...[for every] single week until [Grey Ghost] went into the nursing home.<sup>128</sup>

During the filming of the Grey Ghost documentary, Owens drove the musician all around Central Texas to the locales that were part of the pianist's life—Bastrop, Taylor, Waco, Smithville, and Luling—a few of the places Grey Ghost had lived and performed. In many of the small towns around Austin, people still remembered hearing him play at nearby clubs or community centers. According to Owens, some locals remarked, "That Grey Ghost, he was a live wire in this town!"<sup>129</sup> Although some of the people Owens interviewed had been too young to go into the clubs, they had eagerly listened from outside, just to hear the Grey Ghost perform.<sup>130</sup>

As he came to know the full story of the Grey Ghost's life, Owens discovered that Williams had always made part, if not most of his money, at jobs other than music. That fact became abundantly clear about a year and a half before Grey Ghost died. As the old man's health began to fail, Owens took control of medical care. In the spring of 1995, Williams became seriously ill with uremic poisoning, so Owens took him to the emergency room at Austin's Seton Hospital. Owens remembered the event:

I was getting him checked in, and I started hearing a bellowing voice, "Mr. Owens back here... Where's Mr. Owens?"...I was out front doing the paperwork. I came back. "Mr. Owens, they've taken my pants and everything. You need to take this for me." And he handed me all these wads of rolled up \$20s and \$100s...it amounted to \$14,000 in his pockets. And he wanted me to take that...and go to his house and there's more there...altogether it was \$68,000...I know he'd made good money with me, but he didn't make that kind of money...He ended up making Maryann his banker.<sup>131</sup>

As it turned out, Williams had worked at many jobs during his lifetime and lived in part off of his retirement from the Austin ISD. However, he also had made a lot of money from gambling and running gambling shacks. Owens and Price would use the Grey Ghost's earnings to help care for him during his final years. When Williams could no longer live on his own, the couple chose a nursing home, Heritage Park, located on Martin Luther King, Jr., Boulevard in East Austin, where Grey Ghost lived for the remainder of his life. Owens and Price had selected this particular nursing home, in part, because it had a grand piano. Ever the entertainer, Grey Ghost sat down and played at the piano only two days before he died.<sup>132</sup> Williams had left instructions to be cremated and his ashes to be scattered by Owens in an undisclosed location.<sup>133</sup>

By the late 1990s, Owens was facing serious health issues of his own. He had been diagnosed with a combination of ailments, including diabetes, hepatitis C, and Parkinson's disease. Even as early as his 1994 cross-country trip with Price, Owens was showing symptoms of diabetes and was placed on an oral medication. Price remembered how Owens struggled with his illness on that trip:

Tary had depression at that time because of the diabetes...I had no idea, and neither did he, that diabetes can really strongly affect the mood... maybe there's a connection with the serotonin or something, but there's a real problem with that... during the trip we were falling in love with each other and I was on cloud nine. I'd finally met this man...he was a great balance for me and a great intellect...and we had a wonderful time. One day when we took a ferry...it was a beautiful day and he was crying...[the doctors] only had him on the pills...the pills weren't cutting it, obviously. But we made the best of it...I loved him a lot and told him I would help him in any way that I could.<sup>134</sup>



Tary Owens, circa 1990. Courtesy Tary Owens and the Texas Music Museum.

Because of the combination of serious ailments that had developed, Owens's treatment became quite expensive. By 1999, his medical expenses had placed a severe strain on the family finances. In order to help defray these costs, "an all-star lineup of leading Austin and Texas musicians" played a benefit concert, "Texas Music for Tary," at Antone's nightclub in December of that year. The fundraiser provided "the Austin music community and fans and friends of Texas music the chance to recognize and assist a key figure in the promotion and preservation of Texas music and its proud heritage."<sup>135</sup> Longtime friends and musicians, including Lucinda Williams, Jimmie Vaughan, Joe Ely, Marcia Ball, Lou Ann Barton, W.C. Clark, Paul Ray, and Toni Price came out to raise money for Owens's medical and living expenses.<sup>136</sup>

Hospitalized in 2000, Tary Owens came close to death. While in the hospital, Owens called Brad Buchholz, a staff writer for the *Austin American-Statesman*. According to Buchholz:

I remember [Tary] calling me from the hospital, in 2000 or 2001, thinking he was dying. It was the most amazing experience. He told me he finally scattered Grey Ghost's ashes—not because he wanted to, but because he was afraid he might die and leave the job undone. He'd kept the ashes in his home so many years.<sup>137</sup>

Despite his numerous ailments, Owens persevered. Relying on a combination of Western medicine and Eastern herbal remedies, Owens slowly regained his strength and saw himself on the way to recovery in 2001. "The hepatitis C is gone. I still have it, but I've been taking Chinese herbs from a Chinese doctor... My liver functions are normal. My diabetes is under control. Parkinson's disease is gone. Nothing short of miraculous."<sup>138</sup>

Once Owens regained his health, he wanted to get back to recording and performing and, as he stated, "I want to do the things that I either didn't get a chance to do or finish."<sup>139</sup> Always ready to give support to the Texas music industry, Owens served on the board of the Texas Music Office, headed by Casey Monahan, a long-time friend of Owens. Based in the Governor's Office, the Texas Music Office provides information about the state's growing music industry and helps promote Texas music throughout the world.<sup>140</sup> In 2001, Owens completed a project important to the preservation of Texas music history:

I took all those recordings, those tape recordings from the '60s that were all getting pretty old... We digitized it all, transferred it all onto...DAT, which is digital audio tape...another digital format...I've got them on both, so it's all preserved for another fifteen to twenty years until a new format [becomes available].<sup>141</sup>

During 2002, Owens recorded at least three CDs for other musicians, including one for an artist named Mary Lisa.<sup>142</sup> In spring 2002, Owens also released the first recording of his own music with his band, the Texas Redemptors. The aptly titled release, *Milagros (Miracles)*, celebrated Owens's near miraculous recovery. Joe Nick Patoski, a music writer and longtime friend of Owens, wrote the album's liner notes and described the music. "Part slow belly rubbing romance, part field holler and blues lament, part church revival, and a whole lot of hootenanny and house party, this is what the Texas Redemptors are made of, never mind the technical details." Nine of the fourteen tracks on the CD are songs written by Owens, several in collaboration with his recording partner, Jonathan Foose. The CD also includes, "Mista Charlie," by legendary Texas bluesman, Lightnin' Hopkins, as well as Hoagy Carmichael's tune "Old Rockin' Chair." In addition to Maryann Price on vocals, a variety of other prominent Austin musicians contributed to the album, including W.C. Clark, Orange Jefferson, Pepi Plowman, Angela Strehli, Nick Connolly, Kaz Kazanoff, Slim Richey, Francie Meaux Jeux, Sarah Brown, and Ed Vizard.<sup>143</sup>

The 1990s Grey Ghost documentary, which existed only as a rough copy and needed professional editing, was one of the unfinished items on Owens's to-do list. He wanted to bring closure to his work on that video in order to provide a permanent historical and academic documentary of the Grey Ghost's life. Also in need of organization were the vast personal archival materials Owens had accumulated throughout his musical career, including record albums, audio-tapes, CDs, photographs, posters, personal papers, and other memorabilia. Putting his personal archives in order would be of considerable help, should Owens follow the suggestion of many of his friends and write his memoirs. In addition, Owens wanted to remain active as a performer. "I also want to continue my music playing. I think playing music is one of the things that helped me keep going...health-wise."<sup>144</sup>

In June 2002, Owens performed at the Navasota Blues Festival, an annual event founded in May 1996 to honor local blues great, Mance Lipscomb, and to raise money for a college scholarship for a graduating senior at Navasota High School.<sup>145</sup> Although he was scheduled to play the festival again in 2003, he would not return. In November 2002 Owens was diagnosed with cancer, an invasive carcinoma located at the base of his tongue. Beginning radiation treatment with doctors in Austin, Owens remained optimistic that he would beat the disease. Tim Owens related the family's thoughts about the diagnosis:

We have a friend of ours who's our age...who has cancer...and survived. So we just thought...that Tary would survive it...he said he'd beaten everything else, so we just kind of assumed he's gonna have luck

against [cancer]. But after he started losing weight and not being able to swallow or drink, it just got to be more than he or Maryann could take care of. He needed more care and we finally convinced him to come here [Houston] to at least see what M.D. Anderson could do. And even when he first came, we had...hoped that they could get the stomach tube in him and get him built up and go back to Austin.<sup>146</sup>

By the time Owens first arrived at Houston's M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in the summer of 2003, his condition had seriously deteriorated. On Sunday, August 24th, a message went out to family and friends that the outlook was grim. The cancer had spread to Owens's lungs. Now he had pneumonia along with difficulty breathing, and he was heavily medicated as a result of the persistent pain.<sup>147</sup>

News of Owens's condition prompted friends and music colleagues in Austin and around the country to send cards and letters and to call the hospital and express their concern. On August 25th, Austin disc jockey Larry Monroe dedicated his KUT *Blue Monday* radio program in honor of Owens, a man who had done so much to preserve the music and history of Texas blues artists.<sup>148</sup> Although doctors were able to stabilize Owens quickly and begin treatment for the pneumonia and chemotherapy to slow the spread of his tumors, Owens's chances for recovery were not good. He remained in the palliative care section of the hospital for several weeks before finally being transferred to a hospice care facility in Houston, where family and friends came to visit during his final days. He died on September 21, 2003, two months short of his sixty-first birthday.

In keeping with Tary's wishes, no formal funeral was conducted and his remains were cremated. The Owens Family held a memorial gathering, "A Celebration of Tary Owens's Life," on the afternoon of October 11, 2003, "down by the riverside," at Owens's East Austin home. A recording of Roosevelt Williams performing the song, "You Ain't Nobody Till Somebody Loves You," served as a fitting prelude to the service, conducted by Tary's brothers, Tim and Bruce Owens, a Presbyterian minister. During the ceremony, friends and colleagues of Tary's were given an opportunity to share their remembrances of him, and his niece, Megan Owens, sang "Amazing Grace" and "Will the Circle be Unbroken," with help from the congregation. On behalf of the Center for Texas Music History at Texas State University-San Marcos, Dr. Gary Hartman presented Maryann Price a plaque honoring Tary Owens for his important role in shaping Texas music history. A recording of Tary singing, "Ragged But Right," was played as a requiem for the service.<sup>149</sup>

Tary Owens's legacy in Texas music includes his collection of field recordings, which are preserved within the University of Texas Folklore Center Archives, ca. 1928-1981, located in

the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History. The archives include the collected recordings and papers of other such Texas folklorists as John Lomax, William A. Owens, John Henry Faulk, and Américo Paredes, Owens's teacher and mentor. The field recordings Owens compiled from 1964-1966 form the foundation of the archival and recording work he focused on for the rest of his life.<sup>150</sup> After his own recovery from addictions and absence from the music business, Owens dedicated himself with a passion to resurrecting the "roots music" he loved. By recording and promoting, in any way he could, the musicians who played that music, Owens's efforts put money in their pockets and gained those musicians long-overdue recognition for their artistry.

In evaluating the impact Owens had on helping to preserve Texas music history, Rob Patterson, an Austin music writer, "points to Owens's recordings of [Mance] Lipscomb, now archived at UT's [Briscoe Center for American History], as some of the best versions of the great Delta blues guitarist he has ever heard." Casey Monahan, Director of the Texas Music Office, commented on Tary Owens's legacy in Texas music, citing his recordings and promotion of the Grey Ghost as some of Owens's most important work. Monahan concluded:

Tary's life was about rebirth. He gave many artists second chances. He had a keen ear for music indigenous to our state. He had the will to not just enjoy it, but create the means for other people to enjoy it. And he emerged from his own lost years with such an incredible desire to document and release Texas blues and other roots music.<sup>151</sup> ★

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