



# Reviews

## The Handbook of Texas Music

By Roy Barkley, et al, eds., (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2003).

The perception, among both Texans and Texo-philos, of Texas's cultural uniqueness is possibly most acutely manifest in the championing of the state's eclectic musical heritage. Whether this perception is justified is open to debate, but the fabled "Texas Mystique" certainly operates here, and the idea that the state has produced a singular musical legacy is prevalent. It is no surprise, then, that the Texas State Historical Association, in conjunction with the Texas Music Office and the Center for Texas Music History, has followed the broad-based volumes *The New Handbook Of Texas* and *The Portable Handbook Of Texas* with one that focuses entirely on music. *The Handbook Of Texas Music*, which expands upon music-related entries first published in those earlier volumes, is the result.

The book clocks in at just under four hundred pages and is illustrated with well over one hundred photos, many of them gorgeous, and some quite rare. The front cover is emblazoned with such iconic figures as Bob Wills, Buddy Holly, Mance Liscomb, Janis Joplin, and Stevie Ray Vaughan, and the *Handbook* looks great. It is clearly a labor of love, put together with much affection and the best of intentions. Most who worked on the project, including professional historians and writers, did so on a volunteer basis. As George B. Ward writes in an opening essay, the *Handbook* strives to combine qualities of an encyclopedia and a biographical dictionary, to be both comprehensive and authoritative.

Living performers are not given individual biographical entries, but are dealt with, most often, merely in passing, only in longer essays devoted to specific genres or certain areas of the music industry. This editorial decision, clearly noted in the introduction and following the precedent set with *The New Handbook Of Texas*, was probably not only politically expedient—the dead, after all, cannot take offense at not being deemed worthy of inclusion—but

also kept the book to a manageable size. While this policy may be clearly outlined, it is nevertheless disconcerting to have a handbook of Texas music with no meaningful discussion of the importance and impact of such figures as, say, Willie Nelson (there is an entry for his Fourth of July Picnic), Cindy Walker, Gatemouth Brown or Floyd Tillman (the last now deceased, of course). Similarly, it somewhat skews perspective to have unfortunate early death warrant the inclusion of such modern-day artists as Walter Hyatt, Selena, and Stevie Ray Vaughan, while their contemporaries are relegated to brief mention, if that, in the longer sections.

More crucially, there is no discussion in the introductory essays regarding the criteria used to establish a performer as being "Texan." This would seem to be a key matter—indeed, one that goes to the very heart of why this volume exists—but the issue is never even mentioned. At any rate, as if the state's musical legacy were not substantial enough already, more than a few artists are included on fairly tenuous grounds. Does the fact that jazz arranger-saxophonist Dean Kincaide or legendary pianist Teddy Wilson spent their first four or five years in Texas really make them Texas musicians? Army brat Phil Ochs was born in El Paso, but does that really justify his inclusion? He had no roots in Texas, was reared elsewhere, and spent his entire career outside of the state.

Presided over by a seven-strong editorial board, the *Handbook* was written by a dizzyingly varied array of contributors, many of them, as mentioned above, simply enthusiastic volunteers and not professional scholars or writers. Sprinkled among these are a few recognized authorities, such as Blues historian Alan Govenar and Jazz scholar Dave Oliphant. However much a labor of love the book may be, though—and no matter how many corners had to be cut because of scant funding, time running short, etc.,—the public, which still has to

fork over \$25 regardless of whether the writers or editors see any of it, should not be expected to lower its expectations about what such a volume should deliver.

Despite claims in the introduction that the knowledge of the "amateur" contributors is authoritative, this is far from true in many cases. It does not always prove true in the case of the professionals, either, and the resulting unevenness is often jarring. There are, inevitably, a number of omissions and errors, but far more troublesome is the seeming absence of an editorial guiding hand, which robs the book of cohesiveness or consistency. There appears to have been absolutely no consideration given by the editors, for example, to matching the length and detail of coverage that a particular artist or subject receives with the relative importance of that artist or subject. Indeed, this looms as one of the *Handbook's* most frustrating shortcomings.

Regrettable omissions are perhaps to be expected, and there are a number of them here, many of them made more maddening by the inclusion, often on the same page, of far less important figures. While it might be too much to hope, for example, for the *Handbook* to include the elusive early singing cowboy Marc Williams, it is mind-boggling that it has ignored his important fellows Carl T. Sprague and Jules Verne Allen. And where is Red River Dave McEnery? Crooner and big band leader turned actor Smith Ballew is (rightly) included, yet his as-important contemporary Seger Ellis is inexplicably not, nor is the early jazz pianist, turned pop bandleader, turned successful country songwriter, Terry Shand. Where are important western swing bands, such as the Hi Flyers, Roy Newman & His Boys, the Tune Wranglers, and Jimmie Revard's Oklahoma Playboys? The Shelton Brothers? The legendary country gospel quartet the Chuck Wagon Gang? Indeed, country musicians and European ethnic groups, including the Czechs and Poles,



are generally given particularly perfunctory attention compared to other genres, such as jazz and blues, or are ignored altogether. See, for example, the short, pedestrian treatment afforded country legend Jim Reeves.

Mistakes and questionable emphasis are common. One of the most unfortunate examples is the entry for western swing fiddler-bandleader Leon "Pappy" Selph, which repeats as fact much of the absolute fiction that Selph, an inveterate teller of tall tales, told gullible journalists over the years. Johnnie Lee Wills ran an annual *rodeo* called the Johnnie Lee Wills Stampede in Tulsa. He did not run a club in the city by that name. The disappointing entry for the jazz violinist and dance band leader Emilio Caceres takes its scant biographical detail from a brief twenty year-old liner note, failing to tap more recent, reliable sources (which would have yielded, for example, correct birth and death dates) and ignoring much of Caceres's long career in San Antonio. It would have taken little effort, too, to locate the death dates missing from the entries for jazz musicians Sonny Lee, George Corley, and Boots Douglas.

While the notable western swing groups listed above are ignored, the obscure Blackie Simmons & his Blue Jackets are given a minutely detailed entry that is, astonishingly, considerably longer and more in-depth (again, though, the facts are sometimes incorrect) than the space afforded the legendary Bob Wills. This skewed emphasis occurs again and again. Wills's long-time pianist, Al Stricklin,

beloved but hardly of great significance, also gets more ink than Wills himself, in detail that does not correspond at all to his relative importance. Think of a history of America's wars giving twice as much space to the action in Grenada as to World War II and you get the idea.

This sort of inconsistency is pervasive and gives one the impression that the editorial board, after it made certain that the major subject essays were assigned and that someone was responsible for alphabetizing the incoming entries, did little else. One is left feeling, too, that the book was rushed to press—as if a publication date had to be met, come hell or high water, and was. Many performers appear to have been included almost by pure luck, because someone, in some cases a relative, took it upon him or herself to write and submit an entry.

Almost all the biographical entries are serviceable and informative enough. Many are excellent, whether concise or detailed—and are largely factually correct, if not necessarily particularly attuned to the subject at hand. The longer subject essays are also hit and miss. The piece on the recording industry is particularly uneven. The section on what the author somewhat misleadingly calls "race labels" (actually referring to the numerical series in which the major labels issued ethnic music) makes the bizarre claim that "the 'race label' recordings are of note because they are virtually the only recordings done in Texas during this period." (!) The author then goes on to delineate pre-war Blues recording in the state, seemingly blissfully

unaware that, at each of these field trips, numerous other non "race" groups—the western swing bands, jazz bands, pop bands, and other ethnic groups of almost every sort—were recorded. Major independent labels in the state are mentioned only in passing or are ignored altogether. (Many should have separate entries; only one, Ideal records, gets this distinction.) And, important figures, such as Bill Quinn and, particularly, Jim Beck, who should unquestionably have had their own entries, are given only brief mention.

*The Handbook Of Texas Music* is, despite major flaws, reasonably valuable as a reference work, not least for the attention it pays to areas not often dealt with in mainstream celebrations of Texas's musical legacy—classical music and opera, for example—and to the many obscure figures, from Dick the Drummer to rockabilly Dean Beard, that it attempts to raise from the ashes, but chiefly for the simple fact that it pulls all of this disparate information together in one volume. There will presumably be future editions, if only to update the *Handbook* to include major figures who have died in the meantime. If the TSHA treats any future edition not only as an opportunity to include recently deceased performers and to include worthy performers omitted here, but to address the sometimes major imbalances and inconsistencies rife in this first edition, *The Handbook Of Texas Music* could become essential, rather than merely useful, well-intentioned, and attractively presented.

**Kevin Coffey**