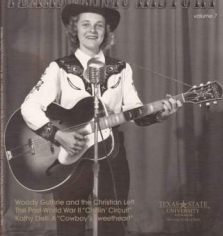


*The Journal of*

2007

# TEXAS MUSIC HISTORY

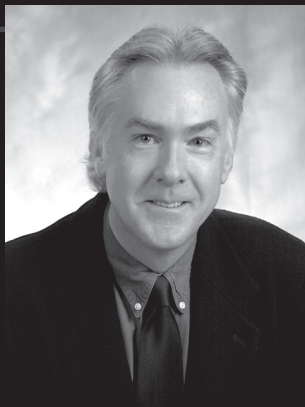
Volume 7



Woody Guthrie and the Christian Left  
The Post-World War II "Chain" Circuit  
Kathy Doherty: A "Cowboy's Sweetheart"

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# Letter from the Director



The 2007 issue of the *Journal of Texas Music History* heralds the beginning of another academic year and another very busy but successful twelve months for the Center for Texas Music History.

The Center recently received a \$60,000 grant from the PSH Foundation to complete the development of our new "Texas Music History Online" Web site, which will be an interactive database of information, archives, biographies, images, sound clips, historical sites,

festivals, and other items related to Texas music. This Web site will serve as a classroom teaching tool, a research database, and an information resource designed to promote Texas music heritage tourism. We are deeply grateful to the PSH Foundation, Humanities Texas, and the Texas Department of Agriculture's "Texas Yes!" program for helping fund development of this project.

Of course, the Center is involved in a number of other projects, as well. We're working with the Texas State Historical Association, the Texas Music Office, and others to complete a revised and updated edition of the very successful *Handbook of Texas Music*, the definitive encyclopedia of Texas music history.

Through Texas State University's History Department, we continue offering a variety of courses, both graduate and undergraduate, including the History of Texas Music, Music and Social Movements, History of the Blues, and the History of Country Music. Our graduate students also have been actively involved in our Texas Music Oral History Program, through which they have interviewed a number of prominent musicians and others in the Texas music community.

The Center is happy to be working with several off-campus organizations to help promote the preservation and study of Texas music history. Beginning in Spring 2008, we will launch a new Texas music book series in collaboration with Texas A&M University Press. This series will feature scholarly publications dealing with various aspects of Texas music history.

We are proud to be working with Dickson Productions of Austin, which organizes numerous musical events throughout the year, including the very popular MusicFest in Steamboat Springs, Colorado. Over the years, Dickson Productions has helped raise thousands of dollars for the Center and has assisted in our efforts to educate younger generations of Texans about the important history behind the music of the Southwest.

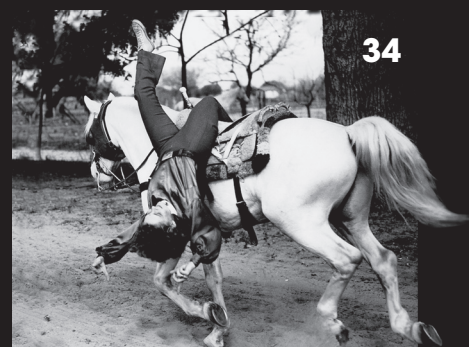
The Center continues to collaborate with Terry Boothe and others at the Texas Heritage Songwriters Association in Austin in order to honor Texas songwriters and celebrate the great tradition of songwriting in our state. With the help of such notable Texas musicians as Kris Kristofferson, Billy Joe Shaver, Rosie Flores, Larry Gatlin, and others, we have raised nearly \$100,000 to help fund our organizations' many activities.

I want to extend my sincerest thanks to the following people, without whom we would not be able to accomplish all that we have done: Gregg Andrews & Vikki Bynum, Dee Lannon, Wes Hardin, HalleyAnna Finlay, the Center's Advisory Board, Frank de la Teja, Gene Bourgeois, the entire Texas State University History Department, Perry & Marianne Moore, Ann Marie Ellis, Elizabeth Denton, T. Cay Rowe, Diana Harrell, César Limón, Patti Harrison, Teresa Ward, Richard Cheatham, Liz McDonald, Lanita Hanson, Gary Hickinbotham, Laurie Jasinski, Terry Boothe, Francine Hartman, Jim & Cathey Moore, John & Robin Dickson, Rick & Laurie Baish, Lucky & Becky Tomblin, Kim & Robert Richey, Jo & Paul Snider, Margie First, Darrell & Barbara Piersol, Phil & Cecilia Collins, Ralph & Patti Dowling, Dennis & Margaret Dunn, Ron & Judy Brown, Grant Mazak, Cathy Supple, Sharon Sandomirsky & Chris Ellison, Byron & Rebecca Augustin, John Kunz, Kent Finlay, Tracie Ferguson, Mildred Roddy, Elmer & Susan Rosenberger, Bill & Michelle Musser, Lee & Judy Keller, Ronda Reagan, Billy Seidel, and all of our other friends and supporters.

I hope you enjoy this issue of the *Journal of Texas Music History*. Once again, we have tried to include articles covering a broad range of topics related to Texas music history. Our goal is to enlighten, inform, and perhaps even entertain, while helping readers develop a better understanding and appreciation for the rich and complex musical history of Texas and the American Southwest. To learn more about the Center and its unique and exciting programs, please contact us or visit our Web site.

Thanks, and best wishes.

**Dr. Gary Hartman, Director**  
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The Center for Texas Music History is a nonprofit educational program designed to help students, scholars, and the general public better understand how Texas music reflects the richly diverse ethnic and cultural heritage of the American Southwest. Within its first few years, the Center has developed a number of very successful projects focusing on the preservation and study of Southwestern music history.

In order to continue this success, we need your help. Your contribution will help fund continued publication of *The Journal of Texas Music History*, along with all the other important educational projects we have underway.

We are very grateful to the donors listed on this page. They have made a personal commitment to preserving the musical heritage of the Southwest. Their efforts will help us continue to increase awareness of how Texas music represents the unique historical development of the region.

Won't you join us in promoting the preservation and study of Texas music history?

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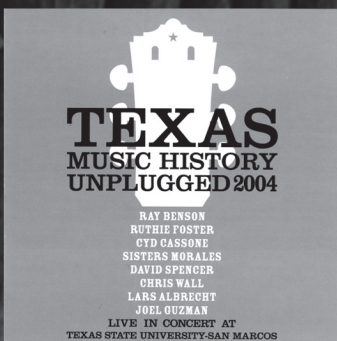
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Briley: Woody Guthrie and the the Christian Left

# **Woody Guthrie and the Jesus and "Commonism"**

Ron Briley

THIS MACHINE  
**KILLS  
FASCIS**



*Following the re-election of President George W. Bush in 2004, political pundits were quick to credit Christian evangelicals with providing the margin of victory over Democratic challenger John Kerry. An article in The New York Times touted presidential adviser Karl Rove as a genius for focusing the attention of his boss upon such "moral" issues as same-sex marriage and abortion, thereby attracting four million evangelicals to the polls who had sat out the 2000 election.<sup>1</sup> The emphasis of the Democratic Party upon such matters as jobs in the economically-depressed state of Ohio apparently was trumped by the emotionally-charged issues of gay marriage and abortion, which evangelicals perceived as more threatening to their way of life than an economy in decline.*

This reading of the election resulted in a series of jeremiads from the political left bemoaning the influence of Christians upon American politics. In an opinion piece for *The New York Times*, liberal economist Paul Krugman termed President Bush a radical who "wants to break down barriers between church and state." In his influential book *What's The Matter with Kansas?*, Thomas Frank speculated as to why working-class people in Kansas, a state with a progressive tradition, would allow themselves to be manipulated by evangelists and the Republican Party into voting against their own economic interests. Kevin Phillips, a former adviser to Republican President Richard Nixon, whose writings are now embraced by those on the political left, lamented the formation of an *American Theocracy* in which evangelicals embrace military conflict and crusades into the Middle East as a way to bring about Armageddon, or the biblical "end of time."<sup>2</sup>

These dire predictions, however, fail to account for the more complex role Christianity has played in politics throughout American history. In fact, while religion certainly has been used

## **Christian Left:**

to promote conservative social and political agendas in this country, it also has been used numerous times to advance more liberal causes, as well. There are many examples of the impact of progressive Christian activism in the political arena, including the Great Awakening, the evangelical campaign to abolish slavery, Walter Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel, Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement, Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights movement, and the crusade of individuals such as Daniel and Philip Berrigan and William Sloane Coffin against nuclear weapons and the Vietnam War.

More recently, Jim Wallis, editor of *Sojourners* magazine, has called for resurrecting the legacy of Christian social justice in order to advance the quest for spiritual meaning and progressive social change. In *The Soul of Politics*, Wallis argues:

We need a personal ethic of moral responsibility, a social vision based on bringing people together, a commitment to justice with the capacity also for reconciliation, an economic approach to be governed by the ethics of community and sustainability, a restored sense of our covenant with the abandoned poor and the damaged earth, a reminder of shared values that call forth the very best in us, and a renewal of citizen politics to fashion a new political future.<sup>3</sup>

This tradition of blending together Christian ideals with progressive political activism to promote social change runs throughout American history and, in some cases, has had an important impact on shaping the nation's musical culture.

When there shall be no want among you, because you'll own everything in common. When the Rich will give their goods into [sic] the poor. I believe in this way. I just can't believe in any other way. This is the Christian way and it is already on a big part of the earth and it will come. To own everything in common. That's what the Bible says. Common means all of us. This is pure old 'commonism.'"<sup>4</sup>

Guthrie believed that communism and Christianity both extolled the common ownership of resources and the means of production. Although he rarely quoted directly from scripture, or from Marx and Lenin for that matter, Guthrie apparently was influenced by such Bible passages as Acts 2:44-45, in which early Christians are charged to "sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's needs." The angry God of the Old Testament was of little interest to Guthrie. Instead, he was drawn to the New Testament and its promise of Jesus as a messiah bringing social justice to a troubled world. Guthrie sometimes cited Matthew 19:16-24 and its portrayal of Jesus as a champion of the poor. In this particular passage, a wealthy young man asks Christ what he must do to gain eternal life. Jesus responds that, to be perfect, one must sell his possessions and share the money with the poor. Unwilling to part with his wealth, the young man leaves in disappointment. Jesus then tells his disciples, "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." It was this same Jesus, Guthrie noted, who

*This tradition of blending together Christian ideals with progressive political activism to promote social change runs throughout American history and, in some cases, has had an important impact on shaping the nation's musical culture.*

During the 1930s and 1940s, for example, folksinger Woody Guthrie combined the teachings of Jesus Christ with working-class political ideology in a way that helped common people address the economic inequalities of Depression-era America. In his music, voluminous journals, political commentaries, and life story, Woody Guthrie articulated the values of a progressive Christianity envisioned by Jim Wallis and so many others. Guthrie's politics were eclectic, combining elements of agrarian Jeffersonianism, Marxism, and Christianity, and, apparently, he perceived no fundamental contradiction between Marx and Jesus. To Guthrie, communism was simply common sense and the sharing of God's resources as called for in the Bible. In a 1941 journal entry, Guthrie wrote:

chased the "money changers," or bankers, out of the temple in Jerusalem, asserting, "My house shall be a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of thieves" (Matthew 21:12-14).<sup>5</sup>

It was these scriptural images of Christ, crusader for the poor and downtrodden, that Guthrie embraced and combined with his progressive political ideology. During the dark days of the Great Depression, when so many honest, hard-working Americans were suffering economically, Guthrie chastised the wealthy for their seeming insensitivity, while he comforted the poor by reminding them that, according to the Bible, the meek ultimately would inherit the earth.

Woodrow Wilson Guthrie, who would become one of the most influential folk singers and songwriters in American



history, was born July 14, 1912, in Okemah, Oklahoma, during a time when the Socialist Party, under the leadership of Eugene Debs, used the region's long-standing populist tradition to foster a strong following in the American Southwest. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, the class conflict between city and country was exacerbated by growing farm tenancy and absentee landlordism. Combining with militant industrial unions of timber workers and miners, the Socialist Party in the Southwest, according to James R. Green in *Grass-Roots Socialism*, appealed to a "permanently exploited proletariat of workers and farmers with a class-conscious ideology more radical than Populist reform." However, the Socialist Party in the Southwest did not champion a materialistic atheism. Instead, the socialist tradition in states such as Oklahoma and Texas embraced a millennial Christian tradition espousing the scriptural promise that the meek would inherit the earth. Accordingly, the Socialist Party often did well in areas where Pentecostal groups enjoyed popular support. In *Grass-Roots Socialism*, Green writes, "In the early 1900s the new holiness sects of the Southwest clearly represented the primitive Christianity of the oppressed. The holiness movement was a 'radical opponent' of materialism and modernism in the established churches, and in that sense it was a product of the same kind of class consciousness that led poor people to socialism."<sup>6</sup>

In *Agrarian Socialism in America: Marx, Jefferson, and Jesus in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1904-1920*, Jim Bissett echoes the conclusions reached by Green. Bissett asserts that there was no hypocrisy involved with the socialist leaders employing religion to attract support for the party platform. In fact, political gatherings often resembled revival camp meetings and included prayers. Bissett argues:

Marxism and Christianity achieved a synergy in the Party, combining in a unique way to strengthen the movement. Thus, while the Marxist ideas that socialists brought to Christianity energized the democratic, communitarian strain in evangelical Protestantism, religion simultaneously deepened and made relevant the Marxist ideological core of the Socialist Party. The resulting message became all the more powerful.

Although the philosophical differences between socialism and communism sometimes do seem a bit blurred in Guthrie's thinking, he did grow up in a region where many working-class people saw no inherent conflict between fundamentalist Christian beliefs and radical political ideology.<sup>7</sup>

Many Oklahoma socialists also embraced the cult of Jesus Christ, which comprised an essential element of Guthrie's left-wing political ideology. Socialists in Oklahoma expressed

reverence for Jesus, emphasizing his working-class origins and eventual betrayal by the political elites and capitalists. This was the Jesus loved and admired by Guthrie in his music and writing. In *American Jesus*, Stephen Prothero asserts that Guthrie and the socialists of Oklahoma were hardly unique in their celebration of Jesus. In fact, both the image and the teachings of Christ had long been incorporated into a variety of American political and ideological movements as a way to lend legitimacy and "moral authority" to these movements. Prothero argues that the paradox of Jesus in American culture is that he is embraced by "Christian America and multireligious America," as well as by secularists and that "To see Americans of all stripes have cast the man from Nazareth in their own image is to examine, through the looking glass, the kaleidoscopic character of American culture."<sup>8</sup> To Guthrie and many Oklahomans and Texans suffering through the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, Jesus was the champion of the dispossessed who would not desert them, even during their long and difficult mass migration to California.

Ironically, Woody Guthrie and his family had not always been among the downtrodden. As a matter of fact, Charlie Guthrie, Woody's father, was a small town real estate entrepreneur who made a comfortable living and opposed the anti-capitalist teachings of the Socialist Party, which his son later would so heartily endorse.



Woody, George, Nora, and Charley Guthrie on the porch of their home, Okemah, Oklahoma, 1926. Courtesy of the Woody Guthrie Foundation and Archives.

However, during the oil boom of the early 1920s, Charlie Guthrie began to lose his financial footing, as larger businesses came to dominate the region's real estate market. A sharp decline in personal income soon combined with a series of family tragedies that would create years of hardship and suffering for the Guthries, placing them firmly within the ranks of the many millions of other desperate families mired in the Depression.

The Guthrie family troubles began in earnest when Woody was still a teenager and his older sister, Clara, died after her dress mysteriously caught fire. Many local townspeople blamed Guthrie's mother, Nora, especially since she recently had begun to act in a very eccentric manner, including wandering the streets in various states of undress. Not long afterward, in June 1927, Charlie Guthrie was severely burned in a fire that, in fact, was started by his increasingly unstable wife. Nora soon was institutionalized and diagnosed as suffering from Huntington's chorea, a degenerative disease which attacks the brain and central nervous system. Due to his troubled family history, Woody,

a physically small boy, often was ostracized by his peers. His response was to perform poorly in academics and play the role of class clown, although he did read avidly and took pleasure in playing the guitar and harmonica.<sup>9</sup>

With the onset of the Great Depression in late 1929, Guthrie moved to Pampa, Texas, to join his father, who was living there with relatives and managing a boarding house. During his seven-year stay in Texas, Woody attended high school, performed with country dance bands, and occasionally appeared on local radio stations.<sup>10</sup> Although Guthrie had grown up in the rather strict religious environment of rural Oklahoma, his family did not attend church on a regular basis. In Pampa, however, Guthrie underwent a religious conversion experience, in large part because of the influence of his uncle, Jerry P. Guthrie, and a local minister, Reverend Eulys McKenzie of the Church of God in Christ. According to Guthrie biographer Joe Klein, McKenzie "was a gentle man with a kind heart — even though he had a reputation for giving wild fire-and-brimstone



Woody Guthrie (left) with the Junior Chamber of Commerce Band, Pampa, Texas, 1936. Courtesy of the Woody Guthrie Foundation and Archives.



sermons every Sunday — and he convinced Woody that it was important to make a spiritual commitment and be baptized by total immersion." Although he soon stopped attending church on a regular basis, Guthrie would retain a life-long interest in the Bible, in part due to his religious experiences in Texas.<sup>11</sup>

It is not surprising that Guthrie was initially attracted to an "outsider" Pentecostal denomination, such as the Church of God in Christ. While most fundamentalist Christians believe that those who are saved or "born again" will go to heaven, Pentecostal worshippers who engage in such practices as speaking in tongues or faith healing often argue that they have achieved an even more advanced state of spirituality not typically found in the less emotionally-charged services of other more mainstream denominations. In fact, many of these other denominations, including the Methodists, often regarded such practices as simply "emotional outbursts." However, because

In 1936, Guthrie left Pampa and headed out to California as part of the more than three million Dust Bowl refugees who fled to the West Coast in hopes of finding new economic opportunities. Guthrie was shocked at the disdain and prejudice with which many in California greeted these Dust Bowl migrants. Traveling by freight, he encountered thousands of destitute, unemployed men, many of them former labor union members with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). These old "Wobblies" introduced Guthrie to the music of the legendary folk singer and activist Joe Hill (born Joseph Hillstrom), and Guthrie began carrying around a copy of the *IWW Little Red Song Book*. One of Hill's best-known tunes, "The Preacher and the Slave," addresses the issue of religion and social justice by claiming that religion is often used simply to brainwash working people by promising them pie in the sky after they are dead. Guthrie was profoundly influenced by Hill and celebrated

*Although he soon stopped attending church on a regular basis, Guthrie would retain a life-long interest in the Bible, in part due to his religious experiences in Texas.*

they involved a more fundamentalist, emotionally-oriented approach to worship, the Pentecostal churches became home during the 1920s and 1930s to many poor tenant farmers who resented the wealthier, more established churches and believed that God would answer the common man's needs through the gifts of healing and speaking in tongues. Historian Jim Bissett concludes, "Thus, God himself understood what the rest of society seemed to have missed; in God's eyes, the impoverished farmers who worshipped in fundamentalist churches were superior to their political and economic enemies." Guthrie had little patience with organized religion, preferring the primitive Christianity of the early church and following the teachings of Jesus. Like the disgruntled preacher Jim Casey in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Guthrie was searching for the one big soul.<sup>12</sup>

In October 1933, Woody Guthrie married a local Pampa girl, Mary Jennings, who at the time was only sixteen years old. Two years later, the couple's first child was born, and Guthrie worked to support the family by painting signs, reading fortunes, drawing pictures, and playing music. Inspired by the massive dust storms engulfing North Texas and Oklahoma, Guthrie began to pen tunes such as "Dusty Old Dust," proclaiming:

So long, it's been good to know you  
This dusty old dust is a-gettin' my home  
And I've got to be drifting along.<sup>13</sup>

the life of this Wobbly minstrel in the composition "Joseph Hillstrom." Describing the execution of Hill by a Utah firing squad as a martyr's death, Guthrie wrote:

My comrades are marching up and down the streets  
Of all the cities and towns around  
They can sing Joseph Hillstrom never let them  
down.<sup>14</sup>

Despite his growing interest in social and political activism during the 1930s, Guthrie was hardly ready to desert his religious principles. In his autobiography *Bound for Glory*, Guthrie evokes the cult of Jesus when he describes his experiences riding the rails with the unemployed and dispossessed. Sitting around a campfire in Redding, California, with a group of men seeking work, Guthrie describes an intelligent-looking young man, approximately twenty years old, who is speaking of the need for a social vision in the country. The young man asserts that the people need to get together and build things like dams, railroads, factories, and ships. He excitedly evokes the image of Jesus in the discussion, proclaiming:

That's what 'social' means, me and you and you  
working on something together and owning it  
together. What the hell's wrong with this, anybody  
— speak up! If Jesus Christ was sitting right here,

right now, he'd say this very same damn thing. You just ask Jesus how the hell come a couple of thousand of us living out here in this jungle camp like a bunch of wild animals. You just ask Jesus how many millions of other folks are living the same way? Sharecroppers down South, big city people that work in factories and live like rats in the dirty slums. You know what Jesus'll say back to you? He'll tell you we all just mortally got to work together, build things together, fix up old things together, clean out old filth together, put up new buildings, schools and churches, banks and factories together, and own everything together. Sure, they'll call it a bad ism. Jesus don't care if you call it socialism or communism, or just me and you.<sup>15</sup>

This statement articulates clearly Guthrie's view of "commonism" and the type of primitive Christian socialism or

When Robbin asked whether the folksinger had any reservations about being associated with the Party, Guthrie replied, "Left wing, chicken wing — it's all the same thing to me. I sing my songs wherever I can sing 'em. So if you'll have me, I'll be glad to go." Further demonstrating the eclectic range of his political preferences, Guthrie also informed Robbin that the people he most admired were Jesus Christ and Will Rogers.<sup>17</sup>

The Oklahoma-born folksinger became a featured entertainer at California Communist Party rallies, leading to speculation about whether Guthrie ever officially joined the organization. Biographer Ed Cray accepts the view of many Guthrie family members and associates that Woody lacked the discipline and ideological commitment to be a Party member. On the other hand, Communist Party organizer Dorothy Healey described Guthrie as active in California Party affairs during the late 1930s, and biographer Joe Klein accepts Guthrie's assertion that he joined the Party sometime in 1936. In his examination of Guthrie and the Communist Party, Ronald Cohen found

*Ronald Cohen found no contradiction in Guthrie's admiration for the Communist Party alongside his celebrations of Jesus Christ and traditional American values.*

communism extolled in the biblical book of Acts. It is a utopian religious vision which Guthrie maintained even as he became involved with the Communist Party during his stay on the West Coast from 1936 to 1940.

Shortly after arriving in California, Guthrie settled with relatives in Glendale and was able to obtain a job with his cousin, Jack Guthrie, singing on radio station KFVD in Los Angeles. Woody soon established a popular duet with Maxine Crossman, whom he called Lefty Lou. In addition to Guthrie's singing duties, KFVD station owner Frank Burke recruited him to do some reporting for Burke's progressive newspaper, *The Light*. Angered by how the capitalist system seemed to abandon the unemployed millions who were living in Hoovervilles along the highways and underneath the bridges of California, Guthrie asserted, "I hated the false front decay and rot of California's fascistic oil and gas deals, the ptomaine poison and brass knucks, the jails and prisons, the dumped oranges and peaches and grapes and cherries rolling and running down into little streams of creosote poisoned juices."<sup>16</sup>

Guthrie's growing frustration with the mistreatment of Okies in California drew him into increasingly radical circles. Ed Robbin, correspondent with the communist newspaper, *The People's Daily World*, and political commentator for KFVD, asked Guthrie to perform for some Communist Party functions.

no contradiction in Guthrie's admiration for the Communist Party alongside his celebrations of Jesus Christ and traditional American values. Like many in the 1930s, Guthrie was attracted to the Party's basic domestic goals, "while resisting any slavish obedience to Party doctrines or dictates." He was more of a follower of Debs and Lincoln than Lenin and Stalin, but he perceived communism as offering a vision of equality, democracy, and peace. Cohen concludes that Guthrie was "a Red, but of



Woody Guthrie and Maxine Crissman (Lefty Lou). Courtesy of the Woody Guthrie Foundation and Archives.

his own stripe — no contradiction in a political climate where anything was possible, as Woody demonstrated.”<sup>18</sup>

Whether Guthrie formally joined the Party or not, he certainly did draw cartoons and wrote a regular column entitled “Woody Sez” for *The People’s Daily World*, the West Coast Communist Party daily newspaper published in San Francisco. The “Woody Sez” columns, which eventually included 174 commentaries and ran from May 1939 to January 1940, featured Guthrie’s drawings and such down home philosophy as “I ain’t a communist necessarily, but I have been in the red all my life.”<sup>19</sup>

A closer reading of these columns reveals that Guthrie was a good deal more complex and sophisticated than the country bumpkin persona he sometimes projected in his writing. Beneath the colloquialisms and the frequent misspellings is an intellectual whose prose articulated the suffering as well as the dreams of the Dust Bowl refugees. Guthrie’s columns do not rely upon quotations from Marx or Lenin, but they certainly indicate a strong sense of class consciousness and disdain for the

believe in life, and wear the uniform of death. There are certain men who never think of any other thing besides slaughter. They are blood soaked butchers and they are believed to be heroes. Three fifths of the people decide to murder the other two fifths, who must take up killing in order to stay alive. Locate the man who profits by war — strip him of his profits and war will end.”<sup>20</sup>

While Guthrie may have been following the Communist Party line in this denunciation of war, his open opposition to military conflicts also fit well with the New Testament conception of Jesus Christ as the Prince of Peace, and depictions of a meek, peaceful Jesus remained a staple in Guthrie’s columns for the communist *People’s Daily World*. Guthrie attacked bankers, landlords, furniture dealers, utilities, and doctors for charging the poor usurious interest rates and exorbitant fees. Guthrie evoked the biblical image of the dispossessed as being God’s

*“Locate the man who profits by war—  
strip him of his profits and war will end.”*

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negative effects of capitalism on the common working people. While not extensively theoretical by any means, Guthrie’s pieces, nevertheless, do offer some evidence of party influence, as the folksinger supported the shifting and often confusing Communist Party line during the late 1930s.

With the secret signing of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact on August 23, 1939, followed by Germany’s invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, it was a difficult time to be a communist. The Popular Front policy of collective security against fascism was abandoned as Stalin, convinced after the Munich crisis of 1938 that the Western democracies would not stand up to Hitler, determined that the interests of the Soviet Union could best be served by a temporary alliance with the Nazi dictator. A corresponding shift in policy by the Communist Party in the United States made it apparent to many critics that American communists simply were following the dictates of the Soviet Union and exercised little independence. Yet Guthrie did not desert the Party, shifting from the anti-fascist Popular Front to a denunciation of capitalist-led wars as exploitive of the working class. In a November 22, 1939, “Woody Sez” piece, Guthrie exclaimed:

War is a game played by maniacs, who kill each other. It is murder, studied and prepared by insane minds, and followed by a bunch of thieves. You can’t

chosen people, asserting, “You Land Shirks, and other Friskers, listen to me, the hungrier you make us, the smarter we get... cause all of the good books on religion advice [sic] you to fast and think...and the fastest you think is when youre [sic] right hungry.” In many ways, Jesus served as an effective model for inspiring people to challenge the bankers and capitalists. As Guthrie argued, “Today we need to make a Whip of small organizations an small movements — an bind them and wind them into one great big ‘Whip’ — an drive not only the Money Changing Ideas and thoughts out of their own minds, our bodily Temple — but all so to drive the Money Changers out of the Temple of our Nation.”<sup>21</sup> He believed that the people did not have to passively wait for the return of the Messiah; instead, they could follow the example of Jesus and overthrow the exploiters, ushering in an earthly paradise of equality based on the teachings of Christ.

Guthrie envisioned an earthly paradise in which all people would enjoy access to the planet’s resources. He dreamed of an America where the common people could find fulfilling work and be free from exploitation. Guthrie placed little faith in organized religion, believing instead in the message of the working-class carpenter bringing peace, equality, and justice to the world. Embracing the Jesus who taught that “the last will be first, and the first will be last” (Matthew 20:16), Guthrie wrote:





*The Almanac Singers (Woody Guthrie, Millard Lampell, Bess Hawes, Pete Seeger, Arthur Stern, Sis Cunningham), 1941. Courtesy of the Woody Guthrie Foundation and Archives.*

Should the Master appear again on earth, that he would take a look at the churches, a look at the sinners, and associate himself at once with the sinners...as he did before. Religion is to forget yourself and work for the good of others. Outside of that there is no religion...no progress...no hope for you, your neighbor, your coming grandchildren. Find out who is causing the Trouble here in this Old World — remove the power from their hands — place it in the hands of those who ain't Greedy — and you can roll over and go to sleep.”<sup>22</sup>

Guthrie was more interested in ends than means, and he  
Produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press, 2007

seemed to have no problem with the Communist Party if it could help the commonwealth of equality called for by the Prince of Peace.

On January 7, 1940, Guthrie wrote his final column for *The People's Daily World*. His adherence to the Communist Party line following the Nazi-Soviet Pact resulted in a parting of the ways between the radical folksinger and progressive KFVD radio station owner Frank Burke. With nothing to hold him in California and restless once again, Guthrie, his wife, and his children headed back to Pampa, Texas, for a short time before moving on to a new promised land for migrants of the world — New York City.

At first, life was difficult for Guthrie in New York, but his





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big break came when actor and friend Will Greer organized *The Grapes of Wrath* Evening on March 3, 1940, to benefit John Steinbeck's Committee for Agricultural Workers. Guthrie shuffled on to the stage and announced that he was proud to be part of the "Rape of Graft" show. His performance so impressed Texas-born Alan Lomax, Assistant Director of the Archives of Folk Song at the Library of Congress, that he convinced the Oklahoman to join him in the studio to record *Dust Bowl Ballads*.<sup>23</sup> Guthrie briefly revived his "Woody Sez" column for the New York City Communist Party newspaper *The Daily Worker*, but most of his time was occupied by hosting two radio shows for CBS — *Back Where I Come From* and *Pipe Smoking Time*. However, conflicts with sponsors over his outspoken political views led Guthrie to quit the show, pack up his family,

and head back to California in January 1941.<sup>24</sup>

Guthrie's discontent with his first experience in New York City was evident in his composition "Jesus Was a Man," or as it is sometimes called "They Laid Jesus Christ in His Grave." Guthrie asserts that he wrote the song during the winter of 1940, as he gazed out the window of a rooming house and observed that the poor of New York City were cold and hungry, while the wealthy were "drinking good whiskey and celebrating and wasting handfuls of money at gambling and women." The folksinger concluded that if Jesus Christ were to preach his message of redistribution of wealth on the streets of New York City, "They'd lock him back in jail as sure as you're reading this."

In "Jesus Was a Man," the working-class origins of the man from Galilee are celebrated. Jesus is a brave carpenter who preaches that

the rich should give their possessions to the poor. Guthrie writes:

He went to the rich and He went to the poor,  
He went to the hungry and the lonely  
He said that the poor would win the world,  
So they laid Jesus Christ in His grave.

The Jesus presented by Guthrie is a revolutionary who comes with a sword to achieve justice for the common people. Guthrie concludes:

When the patience of the workers gives away,  
'Twould be better for you rich if you'd never been  
born!  
For you laid Jesus Christ in His Grave.<sup>25</sup>

In this composition, Guthrie is clearly influenced by minstrel Billy Gashade's "Jesse James" ballad, in which James is betrayed by his supposed friend, "that dirty little coward," Robert Ford. Likewise, in Guthrie's "Jesus Was a Man," the carpenter who champions the poor is betrayed by "a dirty little coward called Judas Iscariot." Guthrie also may have been influenced by the popular 1939 Hollywood film *Jesse James*, starring Tyrone Power and Henry Fonda as Frank and Jesse James, heroes to the poor and downtrodden. In Guthrie's ballad, he portrays the James brothers as victims of the greedy railroad owners who had hired hoodlums to drive the farmers off their land. Even though railroad thugs bombed their home and killed their mother, the James brothers continued to fight against corrupt corporate interests. As Guthrie points out, "No wonder folks like to hear songs about the outlaws — they're wrong all right, but not as dirty and sneakin' as some of our so-called higher ups." Social banditry certainly ran counter to Communist Party orthodoxy, which emphasized collective action and identity rather than individual adventurism, but Guthrie continued to celebrate outlaws' robbing from the rich to serve the poor in other compositions, such as "Billy the Kid," "Belle Starr," and "Pretty Boy Floyd."<sup>26</sup>

Guthrie clearly believed that Jesus Christ belonged in this tradition of the socialist outlaw as his composition "Jesus Was a Man" indicates. There is considerable anger and criticism of the corrosive effects of money in "Jesus Was a Man," perhaps reflecting Guthrie's concerns over being seduced or betrayed by the forces of wealth in New York City. However, he ultimately resisted the temptations of fame and fortune and returned to the West, where he was able to secure employment with the Bonneville Power Administration, helping build huge, federally-funded hydroelectric facilities. Inspired by the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration's willingness to undertake these extensive public works projects, as well as by the potential for

public power and more "socialist planning" to enrich the quality of life for the common people of America, Guthrie penned such classics as "Roll on, Columbia," "The Grand Coulee Dam," and "Pastures of Plenty." The massive public projects described in these songs evoke the "social work" blessed by Jesus that Guthrie extols in his autobiography.

In the summer of 1941, Guthrie separated from his wife, Mary, and returned to New York City, joining Pete Seeger and the Almanac Singers who were performing antiwar and CIO union organizing music. With the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, Guthrie and the Almanac Singers dropped their antiwar songs, following the Communist Party line of again advocating a Popular Front against fascism. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 and subsequent American entry into World War II, Guthrie penned "Talking Hitler's Head Off Blues," which was published in *The Daily Worker*. He also began going around New York City with the slogan "this machine kills fascists" scrawled on his guitar. Guthrie found personal happiness during the war years, falling in love with a dancer, Marjorie Greenblatt Mazia, and beginning a second family. He also served for a time in the Merchant Marine with his friend Cisco Houston. However, Guthrie's political views soon put him at odds with others in the Merchant Marine, and he eventually was inducted into the U. S. Army on May 7, 1945, the day Nazi Germany surrendered to the Allies.<sup>27</sup>

Guthrie viewed the Second World War as a collective effort to end fascism and usher in an era of democracy and prosperity for the common people. Thus, he downplayed Jesus as socialist outlaw in his song "Jesus Christ for President" (which would be recorded by Billy Bragg and Wilco in the late 1990s). With the Communist Party returning to the Popular Front strategy of cooperating with bourgeois democratic regimes, including President Roosevelt's New Deal, "Jesus Christ For President" presents Jesus in a less revolutionary guise and willing to work within the electoral system to create a more equitable and just society. The capitalists and money changers still need to be driven from the temple, but in this composition the process does not require a revolution. With the carpenter as President, the crooked politicians will be dispatched from office, while jobs and pensions will be guaranteed for young and old. But whether socialist outlaw or democratic politician, Jesus will provide the peace and prosperity foretold in the New Testament, for which Guthrie longed. He concludes "Jesus Christ For President" with these lines:

Every year we waste enough  
To feed the ones who starve  
We build our civilization up  
And we shoot it down with wars —  
But with the Carpenter on the seat  
Away up in the capital town

The U.S.A. will be on the way  
Pros-perity bound!<sup>28</sup>

In "This Morning I was Born Again," written in January 1945, Guthrie reiterated the example of Jesus transforming the world into an earthly paradise, although this time the carpenter and the working masses could accomplish this themselves through the union movement. It would not be necessary to have Christ as King or President. Sounding a bit like Joe Hill and dismissing the Christian sense of personal redemption in being born again, Guthrie writes:

I no longer look for heaven  
In Your deathly distant land  
I do not want your pearly gates  
Don't want your street of gold

Instead, Jesus's vision could be achieved in the temple of the union hall:

I breathe the life of Jesus  
And old John Henry in  
I see just one big family  
In the whole big human race  
When the sun looks down tomorrow  
I will be in the union place<sup>29</sup>

Thus, according to Guthrie, the people had within themselves the power to reinvent the post-war world according to Christ's teachings.

Despite Guthrie's initial post-World War II optimism, the 1950s would usher in a politically and ideologically stifling period known as the Cold War, in which anti-communist hysteria, McCarthyism, and a conservative reaction against the gains made by the union movement during the New Deal prevented the realization of the utopia envisioned in "Jesus Christ for President" and "This Morning I Am Born Again." Although he had been involved with Pete Seeger's "People's Songs," a cooperative among left-oriented folk musicians, from 1946 to 1949 and was active in the 1948 Progressive Party Presidential candidacy of former Vice President Henry A. Wallace, Guthrie would not suffer the same degree of political persecution as many of his left-leaning associates during the McCarthy era. This was primarily due to the onset of personal problems and failing health, which kept the singer largely out of the public eye throughout much of the 1950s.

Guthrie's next round of troubles began soon after the close of World War II. On February 6, 1947, he was devastated when his four-year-old daughter Cathy perished in an apartment fire. Although Woody and Marjorie would have three more

children, Guthrie's behavior became increasingly erratic. He was drinking heavily and would leave the family for long periods of time. Assuming that alcoholism was his problem, he checked himself into a hospital. In September 1952, he was diagnosed as suffering from Huntington's disease, which had claimed his mother's life. A distraught Guthrie divorced Marjorie, retreated to California, and attempted to form a new family with twenty-year-old Anneke Marshall. Unable to cope with her husband's condition, however, Anneke soon divorced Guthrie, and, by 1956, he was institutionalized. Marjorie, who had remarried, took over the task of looking after Woody during the final eleven years of his life, forming the Guthrie Children's Fund to help organize the folksinger's finances.

Despite these personal setbacks and the chilling political climate of the 1950s, which resulted in the blacklisting of many performers and former associates, Guthrie refused to recant his beliefs in either Jesus Christ or the Communist Party. In the late 1940s, he still perceived the Communist Party as being the political organization most committed to realizing the promise of Christ's teachings. In a letter to relatives in California, Guthrie wrote "The communists always have been the hardest fighters for the trade unions, good wages, short hours, nursery schools, cleaner workshops and the equal rights of every person of every color. Communists have the only answer to the whole mess. That is, we all ought to own and run every mine, factory, and timber track." Even as his health deteriorated, Guthrie refused to alter his views on the promise of communism. In one of his last letters, he stated that he could not vote for President Dwight Eisenhower in the 1956 presidential election, because "Eisenhower can't be my big chiefy bossyman till he makes alla my United States alla my races all equal...I vote for only communist candidates. Anyhow they'll be the ones to ever even partways try to give birth to my racey equality."<sup>30</sup>

Guthrie continued to remain true to both communism and Christ, refusing to believe that Jesus had forsaken him, despite the singer's rapidly deteriorating health. In fact, during his extended hospitalization, Guthrie referred to Christ as his doctor. Although there is no indication that Guthrie's faith in the communist vision of Jesus faltered, in his final years, suffering from a crippling disease, the singer increasingly evoked Christ as his personal savior. Realizing his desperate straits, Guthrie wrote his father "maybe Jesus can think up a cure of some kind," and he composed "Jesus My Doctor," in which he concluded:

Christ you're still my best doctor  
You can always cure what ails me<sup>31</sup>

On October 3, 1967, Guthrie finally succumbed to the disease ravaging his body. A loyal disciple of Christ who attempted through his music and association with the Communist Party



to spread Jesus's teachings regarding social justice, Guthrie appeared to assume in his final years that his efforts to establish a Christian earthly paradise would be rewarded in heaven. Certainly Guthrie's influence would continue to resonate throughout popular culture for generations with the music of Bob Dylan, Peter, Paul, and Mary, Bruce Springsteen, and countless younger artists. However, in the more conservative political climate of recent years, there has been an effort to deradicalize Woody Guthrie. School children continue to sing "This Land Is Your Land," but they often do so without the historical context of the Great Depression, and the more radical verses in which Guthrie questioned private ownership of property most often are removed from public school songbooks.

*Bound for Glory*, director Hal Ashby's 1976 cinematic tribute to Guthrie concludes with the folksinger's departing California for the greener pastures of New York City in the early 1940s. As he rides a freight train, Guthrie, portrayed by David Carradine, sings "This Land Is Your Land," which he wrote in February 1940. Under the direction of Ashby, the film's conclusion becomes a bicentennial tribute to the resilient spirit of the American people. Most film viewers, however, certainly would not surmise that Guthrie penned his anthem in angry response to what he believed was the shallow nationalism of Irving Berlin's "God Bless America." As Bryan K. Garman suggests in *A Race of Singers*, the problem with Ashby's film "is that it depicted Guthrie as a romantic individualist." In his critique of the movie, Garman argues that, "The most important thing about the film's Guthrie is not that he fought for social and economic justice but that he celebrated the American landscape and inspired all people to take pride in themselves and their individual accomplishments."<sup>32</sup>

To honor her father's remarkable social, political, and musical legacy, Woody's daughter, Nora Guthrie, recently commissioned British rock musician Billy Bragg to examine over one thousand lyrics in the Woody Guthrie Archives. Nora stated that she selected Bragg for the project, because his political commitment and sense of humor reflected that of her father. In the late 1990s, Bragg, in collaboration with the American folk rock band Wilco, produced two *Mermaid Avenue* albums, setting Woody's lyrics to music. The critically-acclaimed, Grammy-nominated *Mermaid Avenue* recordings reflect the wide range of Guthrie's concerns, including love, politics, and even a tribute to movie star Ingrid Bergman. Perhaps it was most appropriate that Guthrie's somewhat unconventional Christian principles are represented by an upbeat rock version of "Jesus Christ for President." Bragg and Wilco also covered another 1940 song "The Unwelcome Guest," in which Guthrie celebrates the outlaw tradition of robbing from the rich and giving to the poor. In this tune, Guthrie concludes that the wealthy and their legal representatives

may kill the outlaw, but others will take his place:

They'll take the money and spread it out equal  
Just like the Bible and the prophets suggest  
But the men that go riding to help those poor workers  
The rich will cut down like an unwelcome guest

The *Mermaid Avenue* sessions reiterate the juxtaposition of love songs, political protest, and Jesus Christ that have long made the Guthrie repertoire so unique and complex.<sup>33</sup>

There is a widely-held assumption among many Americans today that religion and Jesus Christ are the exclusive ideological property of the political Right. This examination of the music and politics of Woody Guthrie is a reminder that there is a long and rich tradition in American history in which many on the political Left also have drawn upon the teachings of Christ to support their more progressive ideology. The legacy of Jesus in American culture goes well beyond such current hot-button issues as abortion and same-sex marriage, and many fundamental Christian tenets also can be interpreted to support what some might consider a left-leaning political or social agenda. Such certainly was the case with Woody Guthrie and other members of the Christian Left during the 1930s and 1940s.

In his reading of the Bible, Guthrie perceived no fundamental conflict between the principles of communism and the teachings of Jesus Christ, especially the notion that the selfish grafters should be driven from the temple of America, and that God's resources should be shared among all people. Jesus, the Bible, and Christianity are contested legacies within American history and not the exclusive property of any one political ideology. While some progressive Christians may be uncomfortable with fully implementing the radical ideas of Woody Guthrie, his understanding of Jesus's teachings offers an example of social justice upon which Christians, and even non-Christians, may continue to draw. As Jim Wallis asserts:

The truth is that most of the important movements for social change in America have been fueled by religion — progressive religion. The stark moral challenges of our times have once again begun to awaken this prophetic tradition. As the religious Right loses influence, nothing could be better for the health of both church and society than a return of the moral center that anchors our nation in a common humanity.<sup>34</sup>

Almost certainly, Woody Guthrie's response to Wallis would be "amen!"★

## Notes


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- 9 Harry Menig, "Woody Guthrie: The Oklahoma Years, 1912-1929," in Davis D. Joyce, *"An Oklahoma I Had Never Seen Before": Alternative Views of Oklahoma History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 162-190.
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- 11 Joe Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1980), 60-61; and Cray, *Ramblin' Man*, 85-81.
- 12 Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America*, 99.
- 13 "So Long It's Been Good to Know You," in Woody Guthrie, Alan Lomax, and Pete Seeger, *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People* (New York: Oak Publications, 1967), 226-227.
- 14 Moses Asch, ed., *American Folksong: Woody Guthrie* (New York: Oak Publications, 1961), 22-23. Joseph Hillstrom, a Swedish immigrant, changed his name to Joe Hill after arriving in America.
- 15 Woody Guthrie, *Bound for Glory* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1943), 333-334. To maintain the original flavor of Guthrie's writings, this paper employs the original spellings and punctuation of Woody Guthrie.
- 16 Asch, ed., *American Folksong*, 4.
- 17 Ed Robbin, *Woody Guthrie and Me* (Berkeley, California: Lancaster-Miller Publications, 1979), 30-33.
- 18 Cray, *Ramblin' Man*, 138-140; Klein, *Guthrie*, 113-135; Dorothy Ray Healey and Maurice Isserman, *California Red: A Life in the American Communist Party* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Ronald D. Cohen, "Woody the Red?," in Robert Santelli and Emily Davidson, eds., *Hard Travelin': The Life and Legacy of Woody Guthrie* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), 150.
- 19 Woody Guthrie, *Woody Sez* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1975); Dave Marsh and Harold Leventhal, eds., *Pastures of Plenty: Woody Guthrie, The Unpublished Writings of an American Folk Hero* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1972), 163; Paul Richards, "People's World," in Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas, *Encyclopedia of the America Left* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 573-574; "Woody Sez," *People's Daily World (PDW)*, June 17, 1939, 4.
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- 26 "Woody Sez," *PDW*, October 10, 1939, 4; Asch, ed., *American Folksong*, 27-29.
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- 28 "Jesus Christ for President," in Marsh and Leventhal, eds., *Pastures of Plenty*, 43.
- 29 "This Morning I Am Born Again," in Marsh and Leventhal, eds., *Pastures of Plenty*, 141.
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- 31 *Ibid.*, 408.
- 32 Bryan K. Garman, *A Race of Singers: Whitman's Working-Class Hero from Guthrie to Springsteen* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 169-170.
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# ***The Post-World War II “Chitlin’ Circuit” in San Antonio and the Long-Term Effects of Intercultural Congeniality***

Allen O. Olsen





*During the 1940s and 1950s, black musicians — the giants of jazz, R&B, and blues — traveled the so-called “chitlin’ circuit,” a network of African-American music venues stretching throughout the American South and Southwest.<sup>1</sup> Although their music is now considered among the greatest that our nation has ever produced, at the time, these artists faced widespread racial discrimination, and most were not allowed to play in the more prominent venues available to white performers. This not only limited the black artists’ ability to earn money, but it also prevented their music from reaching a larger audience. As a result, some of the most talented musicians of the era would never enjoy the financial success or public recognition of their white counterparts.*

Despite being shut out of most “whites only” clubs, hundreds of African-American performers were able to make a modest living for years traveling the chitlin’ circuit. Although the pay, prestige, and working conditions may not have been as great as that found in more mainstream locales, the chitlin’ circuit did offer a vibrant, open atmosphere in which black entertainers interacted freely, exchanging musical ideas and innovations and sharing a rather intimate relationship with their audiences.

The history of the chitlin’ circuit is a relatively new topic of academic inquiry, so, secondary scholarship on the subject is somewhat limited. One of the challenges facing historians who do study the development of the chitlin’ circuit is that primary documentation often is hard to find. Much of what information is available comes from oral histories, which can be



subject to biases and inaccuracies on the part of both interviewers and interviewees, in large part because the passage of time can contribute to lapses in memory or even a distortion of the actual facts.

Despite the limitations on scholarship pertaining specifically to the chitlin' circuit, there is a large and growing body of published work related to African-American musical traditions in general.<sup>2</sup> Most of these provide valuable insight into the importance of music in the daily lives of black communities and especially how live music venues, such as those found along the chitlin' circuit,

However, dramatic changes began taking place in the Alamo City shortly after the Second World War, and these changes would make the community's musical venues markedly different from most other stops along the chitlin' circuit. Most notably, the more popular San Antonio chitlin' venues would become fully racially integrated by the 1950s, something that would not happen in other major urban areas until at least the 1960s. For a variety of reasons, mostly having to do with the city's unique ethnic makeup and a more progressive attitude among certain club owners, musicians and patrons of all races

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*San Antonio, Texas, on the southwestern fringes of the chitlin' circuit, was in some ways typical of the numerous towns along this network of musical venues through which so many black artists toured.*

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provided a vital arena in which musicians, fans, and others could congregate, socialize, and share musical culture.

Traveling musicians have always been important in the evolution of African-American music, and those who toured regularly on the chitlin' circuit were simply continuing an age-old tradition of bringing fresh musical ideas into black neighborhoods and helping to create the kind of communal events that brought people together to share in a dynamic cultural exchange. Musicologist David Evans points out just how important such traveling musicians and their public performances were to the celebrating and shaping of African-American folk culture throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries:

In the towns, blues musicians would gather and perform at cafes and saloons, on sidewalks and street corners, in parks, in railroad and bus stations, and inside and in front of places of business. In the cities, blues were sung in vaudeville theaters, saloons, cabarets, and at house parties, as well as in parks and on streets.<sup>3</sup>

San Antonio, Texas, on the southwestern fringes of the chitlin' circuit, was in some ways typical of the numerous towns along this network of musical venues through which so many black artists toured. With a substantial African-American population, the city had a number of segregated clubs that catered primarily to black audiences and musicians, especially prior to World War II. These included the Shadowland on Blanco Road, which attracted such notable performers as Louis Armstrong and was alternately the home base of Troy Floyd's Orchestra and Don Albert and His Ten Pals during the late 1920s and early 1930s.<sup>4</sup>

and backgrounds began to mingle freely and exchange musical ideas and influences at a time when the vast majority of chitlin' circuit performers and their audiences elsewhere did not.

What developed in San Antonio as a result of this openness was an atmosphere of "intercultural congeniality," in which a remarkable degree of musical cross-pollination took place among people of different ethnic and racial backgrounds. This not only affected the ways in which artists and audiences of the 1940s and 1950s shaped their music, but it also allowed younger baby boomer musicians and fans in San Antonio, who were raised on this rich mix of ethnic influences throughout the local club scene, to develop dynamic and eclectic new musical styles that would help carry the community's cultural traditions to the world stage.

What factors helped compel many of the city's nightclubs to allow, and even encourage, racial intermingling at a time when most of the South remained mired in long-standing segregationist policies? For one thing, San Antonio had always been an ethnically diverse community, beginning with both Spanish and Indian settlers in the 1700s and continuing throughout the 1800s, as blacks, Anglos, Irish, Germans, Czechs, French, Poles, and others poured into the area. By World War II, the city had a number of military installations that included high numbers of black and Hispanic servicemen and their families. When President Harry Truman desegregated the Armed Forces in 1948, it had a ripple effect throughout the town's large military population that reached into the general civilian population, as well. By the 1950s, San Antonio was well ahead of other large southern cities, in terms of racial integration. In fact, when the Supreme Court declared segregation in public education to be illegal in 1954, San Antonio became the first major urban center in the South to desegregate its schools.<sup>5</sup>

Although the city's police department continued to occasionally crack down on what some authorities considered improper social interaction between the races, many of San Antonio's citizens, especially those who frequented local nightclubs, seemed to embrace a very progressive attitude regarding racial integration. One of the first places that this intercultural contact occurred on a large scale following the war was in San Antonio's east side night clubs, the very venues that had been such an integral part of the segregated chitlin' circuit.

The overall openness and congenial ambiance found at the Keyhole Club, the Eastwood Country Club, and other San Antonio venues played an important role in facilitating this intercultural exchange among musicians and audiences. These popular night spots, as well as such municipal venues as the Library Auditorium and the Municipal Auditorium, were frequent stops for Dizzy Gillespie, Nat "King" Cole, Della Reese, Sarah Vaughan, Muddy Waters, Illinois Jacquet, Count Basie, Louis Armstrong, B.B. King, Bobby "Blue" Bland, Louis Jordan, and many other prominent black artists of the day. Often, when such stars were in town, local musicians could be found in the audience or even joining the big touring bands on stage to swap songs and jam.

Of course, these famous performers came to San Antonio not only for the ambiance and camaraderie found among hometown

audiences and musicians, but also because the money was good. Both Johnny Phillips, owner of the Eastwood Country Club, and Don Albert, at the Keyhole Club, were known for paying musicians well. Likewise, the Municipal Auditorium, as well as the Library Auditorium, also paid what was considered at the time to be a substantial amount for national touring acts.

B.B. King was one such well-established artist who benefited from San Antonio's supportive musical environment. In 1952, King released a remake of Lowell Fulson's "Three O'Clock Blues," which soon reached Number 1 on *Billboard's* R&B charts. Hoping to capitalize on the song's success, King contracted with Universal Attractions in New York to sponsor and coordinate his first major tour. Later that same year, he worked with the Buffalo Booking Agency in Houston to extend the junket. King recalls that sales of the single, along with his tour of the South, helped increase his earnings from \$85 to as much as \$2,500 per week. His stop in San Antonio on October 8, 1952, during which he performed at the Municipal Auditorium for \$1.50 per ticket, a tidy sum at that time, reflected the growing trend toward greater economic opportunity, at least for some black entertainers.<sup>6</sup>

The Library Auditorium, once located at Auditorium Circle on the near east side of San Antonio and now the home of the Carver Community Cultural Center, was another frequent stop for African-American performers brought to the city by Don Albert, Johnny Phillips, and other musical promoters. In October 1950, the "Four-Star Blues Cavalcade," featuring legendary guitarists T-Bone Walker and Lowell Fulson, along with Big Joe Turner performing his hit song "Shake, Rattle, and Roll," appeared at the Library Auditorium, with advance tickets selling for \$1.75 each.<sup>7</sup>

Well-known touring acts also played at several of the better-paying night clubs, including the Eastwood Country Club, located far out on East Houston Street near the town of St. Hedwig. An ad from the African-American newspaper *The San Antonio Register* announced the appearance of Bobby "Blue" Bland, Little Junior Parker, and Joe Fritz at the Eastwood on September 3, 1953. Tickets were \$1.75 in advance and \$2.00 at the door. Although cheap by today's standards, these were substantial prices to pay for concerts and nightclub shows at a time when the median family income in San Antonio was less than \$5,500 a year.<sup>8</sup>

As significant as it is that, by the 1950s, venues in Central Texas and elsewhere were beginning to pay many black artists better wages, it is also important to remember that San Antonio was home to a remarkably open, racially-integrated, and culturally diverse musical environment, in which local clubs welcomed both musicians and audiences from a wide variety of backgrounds. The openly interactive musical environment provided by the Eastwood, the Keyhole, and other San Antonio



Portrait of Dizzy Gillespie, New York, N.Y., ca. May 1947, -William P. Gottlieb Photographer. Courtesy of Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division.





*The Keyhole Club, San Antonio, Texas, 1950s. Courtesy of Kenneth Dominique, UTSA Institute of Texan Cultures.*





venues has become the stuff of music legend. The intercultural exchange seen in these clubs during the 1950s and 1960s helped set a precedent for the broad-ranging musical cross-pollination that would help make nearby Austin famous for its dynamic and eclectic music scene by the early 1970s.

The Keyhole Club originally opened in 1944 at the corner of Iowa and Pine on San Antonio's east side. It would later reopen on Poplar Street. An article from *The San Antonio Register* announced the club's grand opening:

San Antonio's newest and most beautiful nightclub... "Don's Keyhole" will hold its formal opening Friday evening, Nov. 3, according to an announcement made this week by the owner and manger, Don Albert.<sup>9</sup>

Albert, who was a concert promoter and an accomplished jazz musician who performed with his own band from 1929 to 1940, used his status in the music world to bring many legendary artists to his club, including Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, the Ink Spots, Louis Jordan, Count Basie, John Coltrane, Della Reese, and Duke Ellington. Not only did these performers respect Albert, but they appreciated the fact that he paid them well. Audiences certainly seemed eager to attend shows at the Keyhole, regardless of somewhat higher ticket prices. As Vernon "Spot" Barnett, who occasionally played in the club's house band, noted "People paid good money to be at the Keyhole."<sup>10</sup>

Tasty, home-cooked food was another feature that attracted musicians and patrons to the venue. Don Albert's son, Kenneth Dominique, recalls that his father loved to cook. "He cooked gumbo — which he liked — gumbo, fish, shrimp, oysters." Local pianist Mary Parchman remembers that the musicians also contributed to the cuisine at the Keyhole. "We would cook. We would take turns cooking. We would put our money all in a big pot [to] buy groceries... I remember Della Reese making the best spaghetti you ever tasted."<sup>11</sup>

In addition to national acts, local entertainers of various types also performed regularly for Keyhole crowds when the touring bands were not playing. One man, who went by the name of "Iron Jaws," picked up tables and chairs with his teeth. Texas guitarist Sam Moore remembers that, "He [was] dancin' while he had that table in his mouth... That's something to see. People flocked there just to see that." Dominique also noted that "You could see the teeth print on the table after he'd finished with it." Another entertainer known as "Peg Leg Bates" often tap-danced on his wooden leg. Local radio personality Scratch Philips teamed up with another man called "Patch" for a comedy duo named "Patch and Scratch," which told jokes and tap-danced. A singer known as "Big Bertha" also was quite popular for her blues. "Oh yeah, Big Bertha was a devil of a blues singer," recalls

Sam Moore. "I mean, really good, and dance while she was belting the blues." Charles Bradley, a regular at the Keyhole, playfully observed "I don't know how well known she was, but she was pretty big around here; pretty big period!"<sup>12</sup>

In some ways, this diverse cast of characters who entertained regularly at the Keyhole reflects the club's openness to performers and audience members of all races and backgrounds, especially considering that the venue was integrated from the time it opened in 1944. June Parker, who was a regular patron at the Keyhole and who later joined the house band at the Eastwood Country Club, has astutely noted that, "It was the first integrated club here in San Antonio. So...everybody wanted to go there...And the people were just congenial. We didn't have any confusion." Anglos, Latinos, and African Americans regularly interacted with each other at the Keyhole Club. More than simply tolerating each other, these groups seemed to readily accept each other and share in a genuinely congenial atmosphere. Jack Judson, a Keyhole regular and an Anglo comments that, "There was never any kind of problems between the races or other types

In April 1950, Don Albert reopened his Keyhole Club on the city's west side at 1619 West Poplar. However, tensions between the San Antonio police and nightclub patrons erupted again, following the election of a new Commissioner of Fire and Police, George M. Roper. On June 22, 1951, Roper ordered the Keyhole shut down because of an allegedly unsafe roof. Albert and his business partner, Willie Winner, hired attorney Van Henry Archer, Jr., who in turn obtained a restraining order the very next day from Judge P.C. Saunders of the 37th District Court of Bexar County. Commissioner Roper's attempts to quash the restraining order in hearings with Albert and his attorney proved unsuccessful, and, in October of that same year, the case went before the Court of Civil Appeals, Fourth Supreme Judicial District of Texas in San Antonio. Associate Justice Jack Pope made his final ruling on October 17, 1951, stating that the closing of the Keyhole was not "due process of law. It is no process at all." Since police never produced any clear evidence that the roof was, indeed, defective, the court reprimanded Roper by ordering that he, the fire marshal, the police chief, and the building inspector

### *Anglos, Latinos, and African-Americans regularly interacted with each other at the Keyhole Club.*

of people. Everybody was friendly with each other dancing on the floor. People bumped into each other, and nobody cared. Everybody was havin' a good time."<sup>13</sup>

Although these nightclub patrons may have been willing to disregard the artificial ethnic and racial boundaries of the time period, San Antonio police officials seemed determined to enforce the long-standing tradition of *de facto* segregation in such venues as the Keyhole and the Eastwood Country Club. As one club goer recalls, "If a black person danced with a black person you wouldn't have no trouble. But if a white woman danced with a black man, it's trouble with the police. They'd sure try to close you down."<sup>14</sup>

Don Albert's son, Kenneth Dominique remembers that, "[The police] didn't want to see this mixture, so they gave Dad a hard time." In order to put pressure on the club owners, authorities sometimes threatened to close down the Keyhole for other reasons, including alleged fire and safety code violations and drinking alcohol after midnight, which was illegal in public places in San Antonio at that time. Nevertheless, the club's regulars found ways to overcome such challenges. "What they would do after twelve o'clock at night — you couldn't buy a drink — so everybody had their little drinks in the coffee cups," June Parker remembers. She laughed as she recalled, "And when the police would come they would be smelling coffee cups!"<sup>15</sup>

pay all court costs.<sup>16</sup> For Don Albert and the patrons of his club, this not only was vindication for their treatment at the hands of local law enforcement officials, but it also seemed to indicate that a significant portion of the citizenry of San Antonio was not willing to allow racial discrimination to undermine the vibrant music scene that was flourishing in the city.

Music fans — both white and black — continued to flock to the Keyhole throughout the 1950s, not only because of the great music Albert booked, but also because there was a genuine atmosphere of camaraderie and intercultural congeniality, something quite remarkable for a major southern city, considering the lingering policies of segregation and racial discrimination throughout the region at that time.

To a large extent, a similar scenario also could be found at the popular Eastwood Country Club, opened by Johnny Phillips in 1954. Located on East Houston Street out past San Antonio's east side, the Eastwood also attracted some of the era's most prominent blues, jazz, and pop artists. June Parker, the piano player in the club's house band, referred to the Eastwood as "Utopia, baby!" Both Phillips and his patrons paid good money for such popular entertainers as Fats Domino, Pearl Bailey, B.B. King, the Drifters, Ike and Tina Turner, Etta James, Bobby "Blue" Bland, Gatemouth Brown, T-Bone Walker, Little Richard, Chubby Checkers, Bo Diddley, Della Reese, Big



Joe Turner, and others. As guitarist Curly Mays pointed out, Phillips consistently paid both local and touring musicians quite well. "You didn't have to worry about being short; he had [the money] there for you." Singer Beverley Houston agreed, saying, "[Phillips] made money, and we made money."<sup>17</sup>

Curly Mays, a native of Beaumont, began playing at the Eastwood in 1963 and soon became a regular there. Mays was a very talented guitarist who had appeared at the Apollo Theater in Harlem and toured with Etta James, the Isley Brothers, Ike and Tina Turner, and others between 1960 and 1963. As part of his act, Mays played a Fender Stratocaster with his teeth and, sometimes, with his feet while reading a paper or book. Mays, like many of the venue's other artists, have noted that there was a strong sense of camaraderie among musicians and audience members of all races at the Eastwood.<sup>18</sup>

Another very popular performer at the club was an erotic dancer named "Miss Wiggles." Miss Wiggles was well-known for performing erotic gestures while seated upside down in a chair. As Austin singer-songwriter Lucky Tomblin recalls, "She was awesome. Number one, she was gorgeous. She was tall, and she was an athlete. I mean, she could dance, and she would do regular dance maneuvers, and then she'd get on a chair and throw her legs around it like a propeller. Stand around in that chair, and she could contort herself around into amazing positions."<sup>19</sup>

Much like Don Albert at the Keyhole Club, Johnny Phillips welcomed patrons of all races and ethnic backgrounds at the

Eastwood. Although he did ban interracial dancing during the 1950s in order to avoid problems with local authorities, Phillips went out of his way to make sure the Eastwood Country Club was a place where Latinos, blacks, and Anglos could mingle after hours on a nightly basis. As pianist June Parker recalls:

When I played at [the] Eastwood, it was out of the city limits, so we had all races coming after hours, because the club stayed open until 3 [or] 4 o'clock in the morning...So you had all nations of people coming out there. We had three shows a night, and after integration...it really got full of all races. The people wanted to mix up. [Laughs.] Sometimes we had more other races than we had blacks!<sup>20</sup>

By contrast, Parker noted that when she toured elsewhere in the South, she and the band encountered very little racial intermingling and usually had to find lodging in segregated hotels, at times with all band members sharing one bed. Parker, herself a lifelong musician who has observed intercultural contact for more than 50 years, added, "Music is universal. It will draw any color. Music, it's something you hear and it will draw you, just like a magnet." Johnny Phillips, like Don Albert at the Keyhole Club, wanted the Eastwood to be a place "where people, no matter what color they were, [are] always welcome." As Curly Mays noted, "Anybody could come out there, black, white, and Hispanic."<sup>21</sup>

In terms of race relations, both the musicians and patrons of the Keyhole Club and the Eastwood Country Club clearly were quite progressive for the time. Music was the common denominator that brought them together, and the overall sense of camaraderie and congeniality allowed them to build a true musical community that defied national norms.

Although this intermingling of cultures in San Antonio may seem unusual, some scholars suggest that ethnic communities are more prone to intercultural exchanges than is commonly believed. In her studies of ethnic groups in Australia, Amanda Wise observed an eagerness among disparate ethnic groups to participate openly in cultural events, such as public dances, that included musicians and dancers from a variety of ethnic backgrounds.<sup>22</sup> As Wise points out, these groups do not necessarily have an inherent resistance to sharing their cultural traditions. Often they simply need an opportunity in which they can mingle in a setting which provides an atmosphere of intercultural congeniality. In the case of San Antonio, such venues as the Keyhole Club and the Eastwood Country Club provided just such a setting in which the city's three major ethnic groups — Anglo, Latino, and African American — could feel comfortable sharing in a musical communion.

The atmosphere of intercultural congeniality found in these



Fats Domino (second from left) and Miss Wiggles posing with two patrons at the Eastwood Country Club, circa 1963. Courtesy of Curley Mays.

venues not only affected the ways in which musicians and patrons interacted during an era of widespread racial segregation. It also had a profound impact on a younger generation of musicians, who would draw from the eclectic musical influences and the spirit of camaraderie found in these establishments in order to create a whole new sound and style that would reverberate throughout Texas and, eventually, around the world. Perhaps most notable of these younger musicians were Doug Sahm and Augie Meyers, whose bands, the Sir Douglas Quintet and the Texas Tornados, would gain large international followings. Also very important were Clifford Scott, Vernon "Spot" Barnett, Charlie Alvarado, Rocky Morales, and Randy Garibay, all of whom would help form the so-called "West Side Sound," which would be crucial to the future success of Sahm and Meyers.

San Antonio saxophone legend Clifford Scott played for a time in the house band at the Keyhole Club during the 1940s. As a teenager, Scott already was performing with such Texas bands as Amos Milburn and the Aladdin Chicken Shackers. When Lionel Hampton came through San Antonio in 1942, he heard the fourteen-year-old Scott at the Keyhole Club and recruited him to tour with his band. Of course, Hampton had to get permission from Scott's parents to hire the teenaged

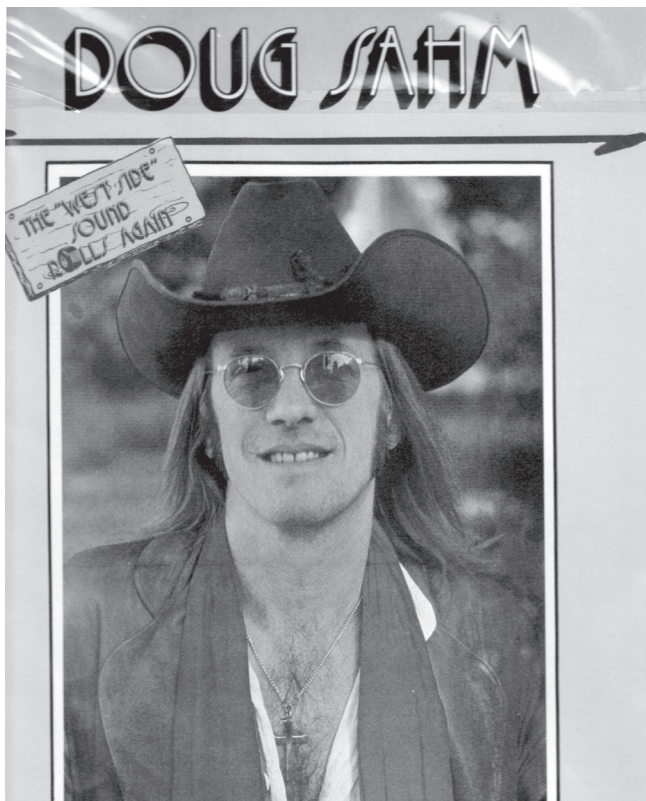
sax player, but they acquiesced after their son promised to return home to complete high school, which he did in 1946. Scott gained considerable recognition as a member of Lionel Hampton's band, and also for co-authoring the popular song "Honky Tonk." In 1956, Clifford Scott and Bill Doggett co-authored and recorded a follow up to the earlier hit. Their "Honky Tonk, Part 2" became a standard for many up-and-coming sax players in San Antonio, including Charlie Alvarado, Frank Rodarte, and Rocky Morales.<sup>23</sup>

Audience members at the Keyhole Club certainly enjoyed Scott's lively performances. "I remember Clifford Scott when he used to walk on the tables and play his saxophone," said Ed Mosley. "He would go all outside, go around the corner, and come back in like the Pied Piper. People would follow him back in the club."<sup>24</sup> Scott also was pivotal in mentoring young musical prodigies, especially Vernon "Spot" Barnett. As Barnett recalls:

I remember, in [Douglass] Junior [High] School 1948, Clifford would come because he lived next door to my aunt. And he would come to the junior school, and make sure that we was goin' in the right direction. And this was like he had already been out on the road with Lionel Hampton and still was a teenager.<sup>25</sup>

Scott's mentoring was crucial to the early development of Barnett, who says he "cut his teeth" at the Keyhole. In 1956, Barnett became the leader of the house band at Club Ebony on Nebraska Street, now Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard. One of his groups, Twentieth Century, recorded local hits including "The Ebony Shuffle" and "Twentieth Century." Perhaps more important to Barnett's career, however, was the experience and exposure that he gained at the legendary Eastwood Country Club, where he occasionally played in the house band. Barnett's growing popularity at these local venues prompted fellow musician Doug Sahm to claim that the sax player "was literally king of the east side." After 1964, Barnett left San Antonio to tour with many of the famous musicians who had played at the Eastwood, including Ike and Tina Turner and Bobby "Blue" Bland.<sup>26</sup>

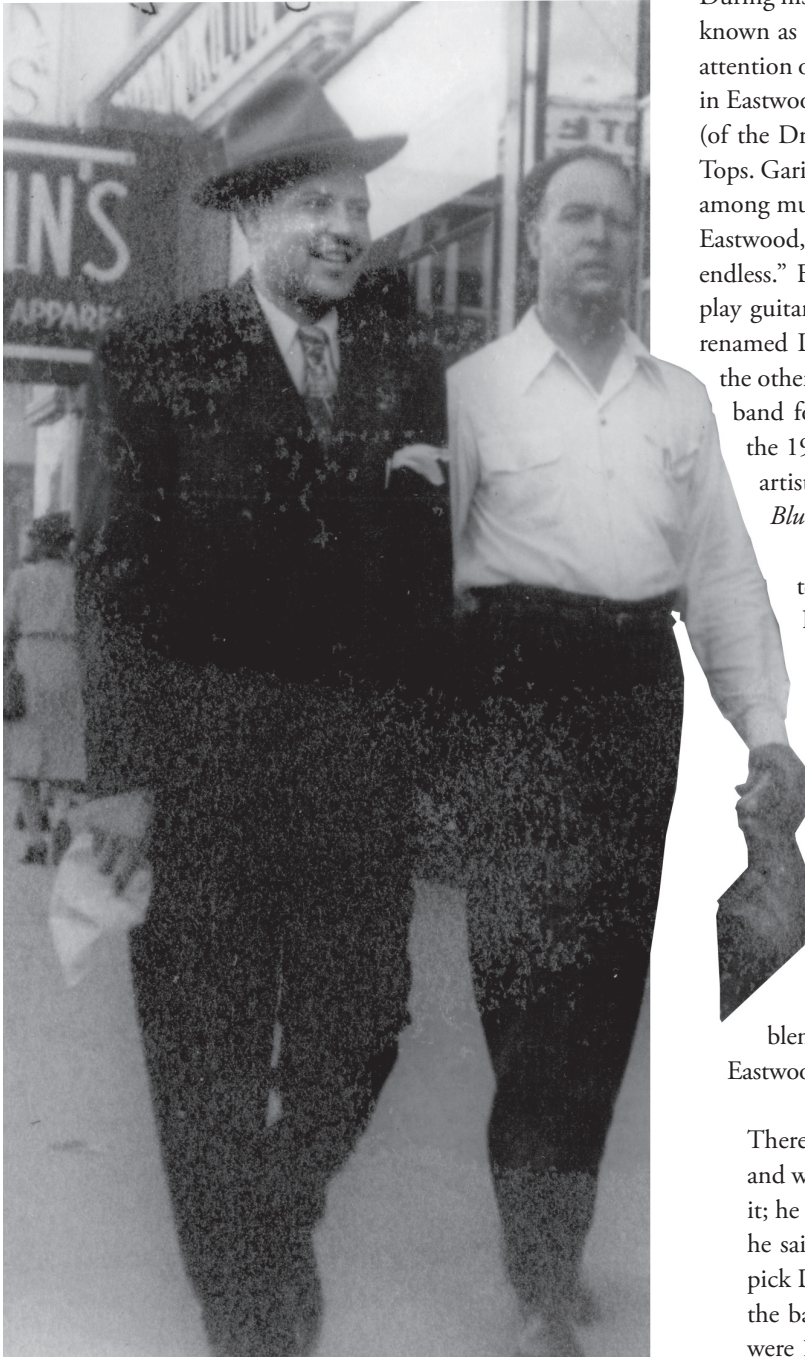
West side saxophonist Charlie Alvarado also played off and on in the Eastwood house band following a stint with the U.S. Marines. "Sometimes Johnny Phillips would say he needed somebody to do a show, and he'd call me," Alvarado remembers. In addition to being a source of employment, the Eastwood provided an important setting for musicians to socialize, and, in some cases, pursue romantic interests. As Alvarado recalls, he and others sometimes went to the club when "we didn't have a girl to spend the night with." Alvarado's status in the local music community continued to grow, especially after 1959, when he formed his own group, Charlie and the Jives, which had the regional hit "For the Rest of My Life" on Sarge Records.<sup>27</sup>



Doug Sahm's album *The West Side Sound Rolls Again*, featured Augie Meyers, Ernie Durawa, Sauce Gonzalez, Louie Bustos, Rocky Morales, and Charlie McBurney. Photo courtesy of Al Olsen.



Another very influential sax man who performed regularly at the Eastwood between 1960 and 1963 was the late Rocky Morales, also from San Antonio's west side. At the time that Morales played the club, Johnny Lefridge was the leader of the house band, which backed up such celebrities as Tina Turner, Bo Diddley, comedian Redd Fox, and local favorite, Miss Wiggles. Morales would go on to play for years with Doug Sahm as an



Johnny Phillips (left) with Don Albert in San Antonio, Texas, 1945. Courtesy of Kenneth Dominique, UTSA Institute of Texan Cultures.

integral part of the West Side Horns, the Last Real Texas Blues Band, and the Texas Tornados.<sup>28</sup>

Guitarist Randy Garibay, who died in 2002, also was a native son of San Antonio's west side. He became one of the most highly-regarded and well-liked musicians to emerge from this younger generation of performers who built on the eclectic traditions of the Keyhole and the Eastwood Country Club. During his high school years, Garibay played with a local group known as the Pharaohs. By the early 1960s, he had caught the attention of Johnny Phillips, who occasionally hired him to play in Eastwood's house band. Garibay backed up Clyde McFadder (of the Drifters), Big Joe Turner, Little Richard, and the Four Tops. Garibay acknowledged the importance of the camaraderie among musicians and the great diversity of music played at the Eastwood, saying that "the styles of music played there were endless." By the early 1960s, Frank Rodarte hired Garibay to play guitar with his group the Del Kings, who would later be renamed Los Blues. As the Del Kings, Rodarte, Garibay, and the others traveled to Las Vegas, where they became the house band for a while at the Sahara Hotel and Casino. During the 1990s, Garibay established himself as a successful solo artist by releasing three regionally acclaimed CDs, *Chicano Blues Man*, *Barbacoa Blues*, and *Invisible Society*.<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps the best-known Texas musician to "cut his teeth" at the Eastwood was Douglas Wayne Sahm. Before he died in 1999, Doug Sahm made a huge impact on Texas music through such groups as the Sir Douglas Quintet, the Last Great Texas Blues Band, and the Texas Tornados. His career began at the age of ten, when his mom billed him as "Little Doug" Sahm, and he started playing a variety of instruments on local radio stations. Before long, this child prodigy would be performing alongside some of San Antonio's most seasoned musicians. Sahm and his lifelong friend, keyboardist and accordionist Augie Meyers, both grew up on the city's predominantly black east side and were strongly influenced by the blending of musical traditions that was taking place at the Eastwood and other nearby venues. As Meyers recalls:

There was a club called the Eastwood Country Club, and we'd go there and listen. Johnny Phillips owned it; he was a customer in my mom's grocery store. So he said, 'Y'all bring the boys out there. Go by and pick Doug up.' He'd set us down in a chair right by the bar. We'd sit there and listen to his music. We were 12 or 13 years old.

At that tender age, Sahm and Meyers were able to hear T-Bone Walker, Bobby "Blue" Bland, Albert King, Louis Jordan, and a



variety of other prominent touring artists. By the 1950s, Sahm was playing regularly at San Antonio's Tiffany Lounge, and he also sat in frequently with Spot Barnett's band at Club Ebony. Sahm's remarkable versatility, including his ability to play guitar, bass, violin, saxophone, and steel guitar, as well as sing, made him a very popular local entertainer. Johnny Phillips often called on Sahm to perform on a number of different instruments in the Eastwood house band as he backed up many of the nationally-touring acts that came through town. With a solid grounding in country, blues, R&B, and rock and roll, Sahm and Meyers would take their early musical influences from the Eastwood and elsewhere and reshape them into a unique and eclectic sound that eventually would propel them to international fame, especially with the highly successful Texas Tornados.<sup>30</sup>

The San Antonio clubs that helped form the western fringes of the chitlin' circuit from the 1940s to 1960s, were substantially different from most other chitlin' circuit venues located elsewhere throughout the South. Although they sprang up as part of the larger network of nightclubs intended to provide black artists and black patrons their own arena in which to perform and enjoy music, the Alamo City's post-World War II chitlin' circuit venues welcomed people of all races and ethnic backgrounds long before this was commonly practiced in other parts of the country. This willingness to embrace and even promote a multi-ethnic cultural environment in the city's nightclubs, despite occasional interference from police and other more socially conservative elements, was a direct reflection of the unique racial dynamics of San Antonio that set it apart from other urban areas in the South and made it one of the most fully-integrated southern cities of the time.

As important as this more open attitude toward inter-ethnic mingling was, it was also crucial that the owners, musicians, and patrons of these venues actively cultivated an atmosphere of congeniality, which made performers and audience members alike feel as if they were sharing in a genuine communal celebration of diverse cultures. At such places as Don Albert's Keyhole Club, regulars delighted in witnessing local artists, including Big Bertha, Peg Leg Bates, and Iron Jaws, share the stage with major national touring acts. The venue's casual ambiance, along with a steady stream of high-quality home-grown and nationally-known talent and good, home-cooked food, helped create and sustain an environment of intercultural congeniality that made musicians and fans eager to return to the clubs and mingle on a regular basis. When Johnny Phillips opened the Eastwood Country Club, he also made the extra effort necessary to welcome people of all backgrounds and to help create an environment in which performers and patrons

felt free to mingle and exchange cultural traditions.

This atmosphere of congeniality found at the Eastwood, the Keyhole, and other San Antonio locales would have an important and enduring impact on the development of Texas music, especially as younger musicians who grew up in this remarkably diverse musical environment began to carry these unique multi-ethnic influences out into the larger musical community. For example, Clifford Scott's early experiences at the Keyhole and other local clubs helped bring him to the attention of Lionel Hampton and make him a major player on the national music scene. Vernon "Spot" Barnett, who backed up Ike and Tina Turner, Bobby "Blue" Bland, and a number of other prominent artists at the Eastwood, later went on to tour nationally with many of these acts.

The benefits of learning to play music in the culturally diverse environment of these San Antonio venues certainly was not limited to African-American performers. Charlie Alvarado, one of many Chicano musicians to play in these establishments, spent a considerable amount of time sitting in with bands at the Eastwood before forming his own successful group, Charlie and the Jives. Randy Garibay's frequent appearances at these integrated clubs helped bring him to the attention of Frank Rodarte, who recruited Garibay to play with the Del Kings at the Sahara in Las Vegas, before later launching his own successful solo career. Likewise, Rocky Morales developed not only his unique musical sensibilities performing in these venues, but he also made personal friendships that would lead to a long career of working with many other prominent artists. Doug Sahm and Augie Meyers, both Anglos who often sat in with the house bands at the Eastwood and other clubs, developed a worldwide following, earning remarkable critical and commercial success with a number of different groups, including the Sir Douglas Quintet, the Texas Tornados, and the Last Real Texas Blues Band.

San Antonio's chitlin' circuit venues are historically significant, in part, because of their unparalleled support of racial and ethnic mixing at a time when such behavior was illegal in many places and certainly still frowned upon nearly everywhere throughout the South. The "intercultural congeniality" found in these clubs was by no means merely coincidental. It was a result of progressive attitudes shared by owners, performers, and audiences alike, who sometimes had to vigorously defend themselves against disapproving outside forces. This determination to provide venues in which music of all kinds could be enjoyed by people of all backgrounds certainly paid off for those who shared in the communal experience, and it helped set the stage for an entirely new generation of Texas musicians to reshape the music of the Southwest and the entire nation.★

## Notes

1. "Chitlin'" is a derivation of the word, "chitterling," a popular dish in the American South made from pig intestines. For more on the chitlin' circuit and the commercialization of African-American music, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Chitlin' Circuit," *The New Yorker*, February 3, 1997 and Mark Anthony Neal, "Sold Out on Soul: The Corporate Annexation of Black Popular Music," *Popular Music and Society*, Volume 21, 1997.
2. For a detailed but very readable overview of African-American music, see Bill Wyman's *Blues Odyssey: A Journey to Music's Heart and Soul*, (New York: DK Publishing, 2001); For an extensive listing of other publications related to African-American music in Texas, see the Center for Texas Music History's online bibliography at: [www.txstate.edu/ctmh](http://www.txstate.edu/ctmh)
3. David Evans, "Blues," *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music: The United States and Canada*, (New York: Garland Publishing, 2001), 640.
4. For an excellent study of the musical life of Don Albert Dominique, see Christopher Wilkinson, *Jazz on the Road: Don Albert's Musical Life*, (Berkley: University of California Press, 2001); See also Sterlin Holmesly, "Texas Jazz Veterans: A Collection of Oral Histories," *The Journal of Texas Music History*, Volume 6, 2006, 28-51.
5. Allen O. Olsen "San Antonio's West Side Sound," *The Journal of Texas Music History*, Volume 5, Number 1, Spring 2005, 26-39.
6. B.B. King and David Ritz, *Blues All Around Me: The Autobiography of B.B. King*, (New York: Avon Books, 1996), 146-151. King recalls his salary increasing to \$1,000 per week; Also see Sebastian Danchin, *Blues Boy: The Life and Music of B.B. King*, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1998), 32-34. Here, King remembers that he made as much as \$2,500 per week; For the advertisement announcing King's first appearance in San Antonio, see *The San Antonio Register*, October 2, 1952.
7. *The San Antonio Register*, October 30, 1953; Dancing and dining also were provided for, and at one time, Don Albert promoted many of the Library Auditorium events. For example, see ads for musical engagements by Jay McShann and Louis Armstrong, *The San Antonio Register*, February 25, 1944, and October 30, 1944, respectively; Don Albert was largely responsible for bringing these top names to both the Library and Municipal Auditorium as early as 1942, two years after his touring group was disbanded. See Wilkinson, *Jazz on the Road*, 213.
8. *The San Antonio Register*, August 28, 1953; *United States Census of Population: 1960*, General Social and Economic Characteristics of Texas, United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, (Washington, D.C: Government Printing Office, 1962), Table 76.
9. "Don's Keyhole to Open, Friday, Nov. 3," *The San Antonio Register*, October 27, 1944, 6. Admission for opening night was \$1.20 at the door;
10. See the documentaries "San Antonio Remembered: The Good Times," written and directed by Marlene Richardson (San Antonio: KLRN-TV, 1998), and "San Antonio Jazz: The Golden Age," by Hank Harrison (San Antonio: KLRN-TV, 1998). The quotation from Barnett is from "San Antonio Remembered: The Good Times."
11. See "San Antonio Remembered: The Good Times."
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Wilkinson, *Jazz on the Road*, 233-244.
17. Karla Peterson, "Eastwood Country Club," *The Handbook of Texas Music*, Roy Barkley, ed., (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2003), 91; See also "Utopia, Baby," *San Antonio Express-News*, February 26, 2006, pages 1 and 6H; According to Christopher Wilkinson, Phillips may have been part owner of the original Keyhole Club during 1947, a time in which Albert was having difficulty keeping the place open. In addition, Phillips occasionally helped to promote touring acts that came to the Library Auditorium along with Albert at that time. See Wilkinson, *Jazz on the Road*, 212.
18. Author's interviews with Lucky Tomblin, Danny Roy Young, Debora Hanson, and Gary Hartman, September 10, 2004; Recently, Curley Mays donated his photo collection to the Institute of Texan Cultures in San Antonio. The author is grateful to the Institute and Curley Mays for the use of some of those photos in this article.
19. Author's interviews with Lucky Tomblin, Danny Roy Young, Debora Hanson, and Gary Hartman, September 10, 2004; See also Olsen, "San Antonio's Westside Sound," 32, in which I incorrectly indicated that the club was on Nebraska Street, now Martin Luther King, Jr., Boulevard; Also helpful is [www.sannyboylee.com/com/curleymays/feet.htm](http://www.sannyboylee.com/com/curleymays/feet.htm).
20. "Voices Carry," *San Antonio Express-News*, November 28, 2004, 1J.
21. Peterson, "Eastwood Country Club," Barkley, ed, *Handbook of Texas Music*, 91; "Utopia, Baby," page 6H.
22. Amanda Wise, "Hope and Belonging in a Multicultural Suburb," *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, Vol. 26, Nos. 1-2, February-May 2005, 171-186.
23. Karla Peterson, "Clifford Scott," *Handbook of Texas Music*, Barkley, ed., 284.
24. "San Antonio Remembered: The Good Times"; Author's interview with Spot Barnett, March 10, 2004, 6.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid; See also "Utopia, Baby," pages 1 and 6H; For the quotation from Sahm, see Jim Beal, Jr., "Pure Cool," *San Antonio Express-News*, February 28, 1999, page 10H.
27. Author's interview with Charlie Alvarado, May 10, 2004, 15; See also Olsen, "San Antonio's West Side Sound."
28. Author's interview with Rocky Morales, March 3, 2004.
29. Author's interview with Randy Garibay, November 9, 2001; Olsen, "San Antonio's West Side Sound."
30. Author's interview with Augie Meyers, February 9, 2004.






Brown: Cowboy's Sweetheart

# **A "Cowboy's Sweetheart":**

## ***Kathy Dell's Musical Career in the Crossroads Region of South***

Mel Brown





*The history of American country music is often thought of in terms of its many stars. But for every performer who has made it big in Nashville, New York, or Hollywood, there are many other singers, songwriters, and musicians with equal or even greater talent who never became famous but who had the same dedication, commitment, and desire to entertain as their better-known colleagues. The role of these less-well-known artists in the nation's musical history is as worthy of documentation as any, since they are perhaps the real heartbeat of the music.*

Cindy Walker, Texas Ruby, Laura Lee McBride, Charline Arthur, Goldie Hill, Jeannie C. Riley, Tanya Tucker, and Barbara Mandrell are among those Texas women often acknowledged for their special contributions to the history of country music in their home state. Kathy Dell, although much less famous, should also be recognized, for she, too, was a pioneering woman of country music in the post-1945 era. Dell was not well-known statewide during her career, but in the area of South Texas made up of the broad Coastal Bend and the multi-county "Crossroads" regions south of San Antonio, she was a very popular and influential performer for nearly a half-century.<sup>1</sup>

Dell's importance to the state's musical history lies in her pioneering spirit and in her many unconventional accomplishments, all done well before the flowering of the modern feminist movement. She was a strong-willed, self-directed woman who broke ground in significant cultural ways while finding relative success in two male-dominated professions, first as a rodeo star and then as a country musician and bandleader.

Two particular aspects stand out in Dell's unique story: first, she was a self-made musician and bandleader in a male-dominated industry that routinely expected deference from its women. In contrast to so many other female artists in country music after World War II, no ambitious father, husband, or manager pushed her along her career path. Instead, Dell chose for herself



the conditions under which she would pursue her musical aspirations. As importantly, Dell was one of the first "Anglo" country artists to incorporate non-Anglo musicians and musical styles into her act. As early as the mid-1980s, she added Mexican-American musicians to her bands and blended *música tejana* (Texas-Mexican music) into her repertoire. She also sought out gigs at predominantly Mexican-American venues and adapted her shows accordingly. As a result, Dell's musical groups came to represent models of cultural diversity that were quite rare among her country music contemporaries.<sup>2</sup>

For those unfamiliar with the hundreds of beer joints, ethnic dance halls, American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars lodges, chili cook offs, or any of the Catholic or Lutheran church festivals of South Texas during the 1960s through 1980s,

friends. Her favorite movies by far were Westerns, in which she got to see and hear some of Hollywood's most popular singing cowboys perform.<sup>3</sup>

Dell's early interest in music may have come from her father, who played drums for the municipal band in a town long noted for its rousing brass bands, classic string ensembles, and orchestras of varying sizes. Music was no doubt played and enjoyed publicly during Cuero's earliest days, but the town began to develop a regional reputation for a rich and eclectic music scene in the mid-1860s. By the early 1900s, several ten-to-fifteen-piece local bands were taking turns leading Mayfest parades or performing Sunday afternoon concerts in the City Park.<sup>4</sup>

German immigrants, who began to settle in DeWitt County just before the Civil War, brought with them a strong musical

### *Dell entertained thousands of fans for more than four decades across South Texas but never, as the saying goes, "made it big."*

Kathy Dell might be a largely unknown figure. Despite her lack of widespread name recognition outside of the Southwest, she was a very talented Texan who devoted most of her life to the public performance of country music. Indeed, Dell entertained thousands of fans for more than four decades across South Texas but never, as the saying goes, "made it big."

As a highly-motivated person who accomplished goals that many women of her generation did not consider appropriate, much less attainable at that time, Dell carved out a career that lasted nearly 50 years, first as a local radio celebrity, then a rodeo star, and eventually as a regionally-popular country music performer. She also formed and managed her own country music groups, booked all their jobs, fronted the bands, drove the tour bus, sewed most of the stage costumes, played guitar, and sang the majority of the band's songs. In doing all this, Dell promoted equality for women and breached specific cultural boundaries with her strong business skills, her fine voice, and her commanding stage presence.

Katherine Mae Dell (Doehl) was born to Walter and Willie Mae Doehl on July 9, 1932, in Cuero, Texas — the "Crossroads" region of DeWitt, Gonzales, Goliad, and Lavaca counties. From an early age, "Katie" was fascinated by the cowboy *mythos* portrayed in popular movies, music, and literature — not surprisingly, since there were authentic cowboys working on the many nearby cattle ranches. As a child, she preferred playing with cap pistols instead of dolls, and she liked to wear cowboy hats and boots rather than the more typical girl's bonnets and shoes of the era. Described as a "tomboy" by many, Dell preferred catching armadillos with her cousins to having tea parties with

heritage and soon took their place alongside other groups in creating a dynamic and diverse musical environment around Cuero. Most local historians now regard the period from 1890 to 1941 as the community's "Golden Age of Bands and Musicales." This era featured brass bands, minstrel shows, orchestral balls, grand and light opera concerts, sacred chorales, and dance bands. A regional big city newspaper once wrote "that for a town of less than 10,000 people, Cuero is second to none in musical artistry."<sup>5</sup>

It was into this rich and varied musical environment that Dell was born. During her early childhood, cowboy songs had a particularly important influence on her. She listened to many popular radio broadcasts, including those from WBAP, a Fort Worth station whose 1923 *Barn Dance* program would inspire later country music radio shows, including The Grand Ole Opry. By the late 1940s, KRLD in Dallas was airing the *Big D Jamboree*, from Ed McLemore's cavernous "Sportatorium," featuring a number of the country's most popular artists. Dell also grew up hearing "America's number one singing cowgirl," Patsy Montana, performing her famous theme song, "I Want to Be a Cowboy's Sweetheart," on the powerful Mexican border radio station, XERA, located in Villa Acuña just across the Rio Grande from Del Rio, Texas. Dell would later adopt the song as her own signature tune when she became a local radio personality at age sixteen.<sup>6</sup>

Commercial radio and what is now called country music, both of which appeared nationally during the early 1920s, have long had a symbiotic relationship through which many musicians have been able to build successful careers, often as part of a larger

marketing strategy tied to selling products and services. On March 1, 1949, during Dell's senior year in high school, commercial radio finally came to Cuero with the first locally-owned and operated 500-watt station, KCFH, the town's day-time only Liberty Network. As a matter of fact, Dell helped to launch the station with her own musical show, prompting early announcers to call her "The Sweet Sixteen Singing Sweetheart of KCFH" and to joke that KCFH stood for "Katie Comes from Here." For three years, Dell performed a fifteen-minute broadcast, six days a week, beginning at 7:00 a.m. and featuring her rendition of "I Want to Be a Cowboy's Sweetheart," complete with yodeling. She usually followed this with many of her other favorite western-themed songs, including "Old Cowhand from the Rio Grande," "Little Joe the Wrangler," and "Out on the Texas Plains."<sup>7</sup>

After Dell's broadcast each morning, she went to class at Cuero High School, where she played trumpet and French horn in the "Gobbler" band. Her band director, George Bodenmiller, who doubled as KCFH's program director, knew her as one of many musically-talented Cuero youngsters. The radio station's inaugural broadcast at the Rialto Theater on Main Street also featured nine-year-old piano prodigy, Charles Prause, as well as Ben E. Prause's Turkey Trotters Band. The latter was an offshoot of the Ben B. Prause Orchestra, which was extremely popular throughout the Texas Crossroads and Coastal Bend area during the big band swing era of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s.<sup>8</sup>

Some of Dell's other musical influences included the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers. Dell once told a local reporter that she recalled often cranking up the family's old Victrola in order to play records, especially two of her Carter Family favorites, "We

for the small but busy Cuero Taxi Company. Her cab-driving job and frequent radio broadcasts soon made the spirited young woman familiar to most of Cuero's citizens. For the next three years, she continued to broadcast her morning radio show from the small studio next to the transmission tower out on the Victoria highway. Sponsored by Ferguson's Five & Dime Store on three of those mornings, she earned \$5 per show — \$15 for 45 minutes of programming per week.<sup>10</sup> Cuero's KCFH began its broadcast day at 6:00 a.m., playing cowboy tunes on a show called the "Record Rodeo." Dell was next with her "Liberty Jamboree." Thirty minutes of news followed, and then the younger brother of western swing pioneer Bob Wills, Johnnie Lee Wills and His Boys, rounded out the hour using pre-recorded performances, or "transcriptions," including the band's Top Ten country hit "Rag Mop."<sup>11</sup>

Dell's youthful radio experience gave her a taste for show business that lasted a lifetime and even helped earn her a spot on regional television. "Red River" Dave McEnery, San Antonio's prolific singer, songwriter, and cowboy movie star, brought his stage show to Cuero's Rialto Theater on a Saturday in 1950. Following his performance, Dell approached him, stuck out her hand, and said "Howdy sir, I'm Katie Doehl and I play guitar and sing on the radio!"<sup>12</sup> The affable McEnery was so impressed with the young singer that he invited her to be on his new live-music program, which aired on WOAI-TV, the Alamo City's first television station. Despite a successful TV debut, Dell remained unimpressed with this new broadcast medium and returned to Cuero still committed to performing primarily on radio.<sup>13</sup>

Dell, who already had taken the first few steps toward a musical

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*During her late teens, Dell's fascination with all things "cowboy" led her to begin working as a rodeo "cowgirl," through which she learned to ride bulls and broncos and to perform trick riding.*

Reap as We Sow" and "Wabash Cannonball." In addition to the Carters, Dell listened frequently to Jimmie Rodgers, from whom she learned to yodel, a talent for which she later became well-known. Rodgers's songs, "Any Old Time" and "The Yodeling Ranger," were among her favorites. Dell taught herself to play the guitar, using first a cigar box model that her dad helped fashion. As she later recalled, "I always had an interest in music and got me a book on the guitar and just figured it out."<sup>9</sup> By the time of her 1949 radio debut, her father had bought her a Sears Silvertone guitar, which, at the time, was a very popular model for beginners because of its sturdy construction and low price.

After graduating from high school in May 1949, Dell took an unusual job for a sixteen-year-old girl when she began driving

career, soon became involved in yet another profession that was very unusual for women and one that helped shape her music in many ways. During her late teens, Dell's fascination with all things "cowboy" led her to begin working as a rodeo "cowgirl," through which she learned to ride bulls and broncos and to perform trick riding. By 1950, she had become well-known on the All Girls Pro-Rodeo circuit across Texas and other western states, and, in 1952, she won second place in the national All Girls Bull Riding Championship held in Tulsa, Oklahoma.<sup>14</sup>

Dell learned most of her riding skills from Lucyle Cowey, a world champion rodeo rider and wild-west show star from Cuero, who became Dell's mentor and close friend. Much like her protégé, Cowey, a consummate horse rider and performer,



certainly was an "unconventional" woman in many ways. Married more than a dozen times, Cowey was the All Around Women's Rodeo Grand Champion in the mid-1930s, as well as the Women's Saddle Bronc Champion from 1951 to 1957. As a pilot during World War II, she also flew bombers to Great Britain for the U.S. Air Transport Auxiliary.<sup>15</sup>

Inspired by Cowey's determination to excel in areas not commonly accessible to most women, Dell continued to compete on the rugged and sometimes dangerous rodeo circuit. She also began to hone her musical performances until she became a featured act at a variety of larger venues, often using her "singing cowgirl" persona on local radio programs to promote herself throughout the regional circuit. Dell once told the Cuero newspaper, "They would interview some of the cowgirls and some of the top champions on the radio and I'd sing a few songs." In particular, her yodeling in "I Want to Be a Cowboy's Sweetheart" was always a crowd pleaser, and Dell began to increasingly enjoy performing in front of large audiences.<sup>16</sup>

In 1953, Dell and Cowey spent several months living at Cowey's horse ranch near Bandera, the "Cowboy Capital of the World," located one hour northwest of San Antonio in the heart of the Texas Hill Country. While there, they kept busy performing at rodeos and Wild West shows on nearby "dude ranches." They also spent some time in Bandera's rowdy saloons and colorful nightclubs, including the Cabaret and the Silver Spur, which, in its heyday, hosted Bob Wills, Ernest Tubb, Adolph Hofner, and other top country performers of the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>17</sup>

Music gradually became more important to Dell than horse riding, especially during the rodeo's off-season, when she spent more time at home. During the mid-1950s, she began to perform as a guest singer with several local bands, as well as with some that were touring through the area. It was around this time that she changed her stage name from Katie Doehl to Kathy Dell, since many people found the name Doehl hard to pronounce, and she considered "Katie" to be more of a "child's" name.<sup>18</sup>

In mid-1954, Ellis Fellers, a young bass player from Cuero who was playing with an Austin-based country band, the Colorado River Boys, asked Dell to join him on the 100-mile drive up to the capital, so she could perform there with his band on weekends. By then, her singing and yodeling were well-developed following her three-year stint on KCFH radio, along with her frequent rodeo performances. Never short of self-confidence, Dell sang and played guitar with the Colorado River Boys for nearly six months at some of the most popular country music clubs in Austin, including the Skyline Club, Dessau Hall, the Split Rail, the Corral, Hill Top Inn, and the Wagon Wheel. With her numerous appearances throughout the Austin area, Dell made an important transition from being a solo performer to fronting an entire band.<sup>19</sup>

In early 1955, Dell began to sit in occasionally with the

Southernaires, a Cuero-based honky-tonk group that performed throughout South Texas. By then, large, multi-instrumental western swing ensembles — so popular in country music during the 1930s and 1940s — were being replaced by smaller bands as the result of rising costs and changing tastes among country music audiences brought on by post-war urbanization and the growing popularity of rock and roll. As Rusty Locke, a steel guitarist and former member of the Texas Top Hands, explained, "rock and roll and drive-in movies hurt the [western swing] band business at that time."<sup>20</sup>

By the early 1950s, there were hundreds of beer joints across southern Texas that had plenty of space for the more compact honky-tonk bands. Often comprised of four to six musicians, these bands usually featured an electric lead or steel guitar rather than the traditional fiddle of previous years. Honky-tonk music became popular among audiences who patronized the many taverns, roadhouses, and rural dance halls of the region. As author Rick Koster says, honky tonk music "provided countless three-minute soundtracks to a beer soaked generation of hard-livin', hard-workin' folks of decidedly rural and conservative demeanor."<sup>21</sup>

By the time Dell started performing in country bands, honky tonk was the favored genre of bar patrons and audiences across Texas. Honky tonk songs, which have been noted for their tendency to address certain socio-cultural themes, often focus on such rural or urban working-class concerns as loneliness, lost love, infidelity, divorce, and attempts to cope with such problems by turning to liquor. Al Dexter, of Jacksonville, Texas, was one of the first to use the term "honky tonk" in a song title when he released "Honky Tonk Blues" in 1937. Soon, the label "honky tonk" was being applied not only to the roadhouses and neighborhood bars in which this type of music was played, but also to the music itself.<sup>22</sup>

In early 1956, after gaining honky-tonk experience with the Colorado River Boys and the Southernaires, Dell organized a band of her own, the Square D Ranch Hands, which had its first paying job at the popular White Leghorn Inn in Westhoff, north of Cuero on U.S. Highway 87. Dell quickly became known for her heartfelt and soulful renditions of certain honky-tonk songs, but since she was still performing on the rodeo circuit, she also kept singing the old cowboy songs. With Dell's ever-popular "I Want to Be a Cowboy's Sweetheart" as her theme song, the Square D Ranch Hands remained popular throughout the region for the next fifteen years. As band leader, Dell played guitar and sang, backed by Ed Kinney on the fiddle, Ellis Fellers on electric bass, and Vernon Whitehead on steel guitar. She once told a reporter, "Western Music is really folk music, simple and sentimental with a strong dance beat which explains why it has appeal all over the country."<sup>23</sup>

As bookings increased and she gained more experience as a bandleader, Dell soon hired a drummer and another lead

guitarist named Johnny Naunheim, a friend from Cuero. Except for a brief stint in the U.S. Army from 1959 to 1960, Naunheim would perform in every band Dell led during the next four decades. Other personnel came and went, but Naunheim became a constant fixture in Dell's life. Although they never married, they were nearly inseparable as friends for more than 40 years.<sup>24</sup> Naunheim stood next to Dell on stages large and small across the Coastal Plains from Houston to Corpus Christi, north to San Antonio, westward to Uvalde, up to Bandera, and then back home to Cuero. In slow times, they often performed as a duo in tiny clubs or for weddings, birthday parties, and other private celebrations. More often, though, they fronted for as many as six players in bands that became well-known throughout the region for their lively, upbeat performances.<sup>25</sup>

Naunheim was unswervingly loyal to Dell, at times protecting her from unruly honky-tonk crowds. Former drummer Richard Faircloth recalls one such occasion when Dell was harassed by a drunken audience member:

One time we were performing near Port Lavaca to an Indianola Beach crowd just outside a small beer joint named Ruby's. There was this one guy who kept steadily coming up to the front of the little bandstand and bugging Kathy to play a request. He must have got anxious because he finally reached up and grabbed Kathy's guitar. That pulled her head down due to the strap around her neck and Johnny reacted without missing a lick. Well, Johnny was playing a dang ol' Gibson Les Paul guitar at that time and he just took that big ol' guitar and bopped that guy on top of his head with that guitar. And the guy of course backed off. Of course it was kind of loud comin' through the amplifier but it backed that ol' boy off!"<sup>26</sup>

Dell's bands played sets made up mainly of country classics mixed with current hits. She never wrote an original song but chose instead to deliver popular material to the best of her



*The Square D Ranch Hands, circa 1960.*

*(L-R) Johnny Naunheim, Glen Halmark, Kathy Dell, and "Lefty" Heine. Photo courtesy of Dorothy Allsbrook.*



band's ability. A representative play list of Dell's included "Walk On By," "San Antonio Rose," "Fraulein," "Together Again," "Almost Persuaded," "Jole Blonde," "Hey Baby, Que Paso?" "Johnny B. Good," "Gimme That Old Time Rock and Roll," "Achy Breaky Heart," "Red Sails In the Sunset," "Sentimental Journey," "Harbor Lights," "Cattle Call," "Out On the Texas Plains," and many others from across genres and time periods. By the mid 1960s, Dell had also become well-known for her ability to sing like Patsy Cline when performing such hits as "I Fall to Pieces" and "Walkin' After Midnight." In general, Dell always kept abreast of current hit songs and popular trends so as to accommodate the wide range of patrons who came to the clubs and halls to hear live dance music.

Dell's bands also kept their repertoire filled with such waltzes and polkas as "Westphalia Waltz," "Julaida Polka," "Shiner Song," "Red and White Polka," and others. These songs were always in demand, especially in the Crossroads region of Texas, which had been settled largely by German, Czech, and Polish immigrants in the nineteenth century. Dell's mixed ethnic heritage of German and Polish, or "Pollander," as she sometimes called it, assured that her bands were proficient at playing polkas and waltzes for the myriad of ethnic venues in the region.<sup>27</sup>

The many ethnic dance halls constructed throughout Central and South Texas beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century provided plenty of venues for Dell's bands. The popular wooden structures were built in rural and small-town Texas by a variety of German, Czech, and Polish groups, including *Schützen Vereine* (shooting clubs), such fraternal lodges as the Sons of Hermann, and such societies as the KJT (Catholic Union of Texas) and the SPJST (Slavonic Benevolent Order of the State of Texas). At one time or another, Dell's bands played the dance halls at Lenz, Lindenau, Nordheim, Schroeder, Westphalia, Gruenau, Westhoff, as well as other sites in nearby Golly, Shiloh, Cheapside, Arneckeville, and Mission Valley. They also performed in most of the halls, clubs, and beer joints in the neighboring towns of Yoakum, Gonzales, Yorktown, Refugio, Goliad, Victoria, Beeville, and others further away in Corpus Christi and San Antonio.<sup>28</sup>

Dell's eclectic repertoire worked well for 40 years, as her various bands stayed busy playing an average of two to three nights per week, and sometimes as many as five or six. She handled all the bookings and was apparently quite good at marketing herself, as indicated by the sheer number of venues and events, both large and small, at which she played over the years. There is little doubt that Dell's musical diversity helped land her bands many jobs, since they could play some rock and roll, rhythm and blues, pop tunes, or even ethnic folk music as needed. Despite covering such a broad range of material, Dell and her band mates rarely rehearsed, since frequent gigs provided ample opportunity to practice.<sup>29</sup>

Dell was first and foremost a professional who honored her performance commitments. Former drummer, Richard Faircloth, related an anecdote that exemplifies her professionalism. She had booked the band for a Saturday night gig in late January at the Lenz Dance Hall about 40 miles west of Cuero in Karnes County. However, the weather turned bad that weekend, as temperatures plummeted into the teens. Nevertheless, Dell drove the bus and got the band to Lenz before the appointed hour.<sup>30</sup> As sleet began to fall outside, the band started on schedule at exactly 6:00 p.m., playing six or seven songs to the only other person there, the hall manager with whom Dell had booked the show. The manager had decided to open on the off chance that others might show up in spite of the weather. Determined to fulfill its professional obligation, the band braved the frigid temperatures for approximately half an hour, as Johnny Naunheim played lead guitar with gloved hands. However, when no one else showed up, Dell closed the show and drove the bus back to Cuero in a freezing rain.<sup>31</sup>

At a time when women were expected to defer to men, Dell managed all the business details of her bands' performances in a confident and non-deferential manner. A few times, she and "the boys" arrived for the contracted job to find another band already there due to an accidental double booking. Not one to be intimidated, she would stand firm and insist that a so-called "battle of the bands" be held. This usually meant that both groups played sets and then split the door proceeds. On occasion, a true band battle occurred in which the audience voted with voices, boots, and applause for the group they preferred. Either way, both bands got paid something in spite of any errors that may have been made by the club's management.

Dell occasionally encountered prejudice along the way, but she usually overcame it or simply ignored it. Some male bar owners would not book her bands, and some male musicians refused to play with her, because they could not accept having a woman in charge. Dell did not hesitate to fire a band member if his actions hurt the band's performance or overall reputation. Naunheim remembers a gig at which a band member, who fancied himself a "ladies man," got the entire group into trouble by flirting with a married woman during the evening's performance. As the band packed up to leave after the show, they discovered that every tire on their van, including the spare, had been slashed, leaving them stranded 40 miles from home at 2:00 in the morning. Believing that the husband had done this as a result of the improper behavior of her drummer, Dell fired him rather than jeopardize the entire group's safety and standing in the local community.<sup>32</sup>

Thanks to Dell's reputation as a dynamic and reliable entertainer, her band enjoyed some long-lasting gigs. For over seven years in the 1970s, for example, her group played a regular Thursday night job in Port Lavaca at an upscale cocktail

lounge, the Santa Maria Club. Another popular venue in which they performed for several years was Booth's Trading Post, well-known for its barbecue, near Richmond west of Houston. Booth's was owned and operated by Agnes Booth, a colorful, eccentric rancher famous for herding cattle while driving a Cadillac. Although it started as a barbecue joint, Booth's opened its dance floor in 1965 and began hiring local bands, which soon attracted hundreds of dancers every Saturday night from May through September.<sup>33</sup>

Kathy Dell's band became a favorite of Booth's for one important reason — they came to play. Dell's group usually performed an opening set that lasted 90 minutes, took a fifteen-minute break, played an hour more, took another break, and then played until closing time. As Booth once remarked, "I brought in a few big name bands but folks around here just didn't like them. Those bands take a 20-minute break every half hour. When folks come here they want to dance, not listen to the juke box half the night."<sup>34</sup> In part because of Kathy Dell's popularity, the Saturday night dances at Booth's Trading Post eventually became as famous as the barbecue. At Booth's and many other venues across South and South Central Texas, Dell was a dynamic performer whose diverse skills and strong work ethic made her an important figure in the region's musical community.

Over the years, Dell performed with some well-known figures in country music. In the early 1960s, Bob Wills once invited her on stage to play with his Texas Playboys. At that time Wills and his Texas Playboys performed regularly at the Lone Star Club in Port Lavaca, where Dell's bands also played on occasion. She and the band also frequently backed up touring acts that performed at local dance halls, including James O'Gwynn, a Houston Hometown Jamboree and Louisiana Hayride veteran known as "The Smilin' Irishman." O'Gwynn was a singer-songwriter who had several hit tunes, such as "Talk to Me,

Lonesome Heart" and "House of Blue Lovers" in the early 1960s. In addition, Dell played for Frankie Miller, a successful country singer from nearby Victoria, who had the 1959 hit single "Blackland Farmer." The Square D Ranch Hands also backed Charlie Walker of Copeville, Texas, who performed on the Grand Ole Opry and in Las Vegas nightclubs. Dell and her band usually performed with Walker at Schroeder Hall, one of the best-known dance halls in the Crossroads region.<sup>35</sup>

Another favorite venue for Dell's band was the dance hall at Beeville's Chase Field Naval Air Station. It was there in 1963 that they performed with Willie Nelson, who had penned the hits "Funny How Time Slips Away," "Hello Walls," and "Crazy." Nelson was playing to a large audience in the Enlisted Men's Club, while Dell was on stage in the Chief Petty Officers Club located in the same building. During one of his breaks, Nelson wandered into the smaller venue, where he found the Square D Ranch Hands playing and asked if he could sit in, much to the band's and the audiences' surprise and delight. Naunheim handed his Fender Jaguar guitar to Nelson, who then joined Dell for a short set along with her cousin, Jimmy Lane, on drums. Nelson played "Wildwood Flower" and then "Hello Walls," plus two other songs with Dell on vocals and rhythm guitar.<sup>36</sup>

Throughout the entire time that Dell was performing professionally, she also continued to work a regular "day" job, managing a western goods and clothing store, along with a small liquor store owned by her father in Cuero. In 1968, she began managing the Cuero Music Company for its original owner, local musician Richard Faircloth. He later opened a second store in Beeville, and then, in 1976, sold Dell the Cuero business, which she operated until 2001.<sup>37</sup>

In 1969, Dell and Naunheim joined Faircloth's band, the Country Kings, forming a new group known as "Kathy Dell with The Country Kings." She then purchased a customized

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Kathy Dell and the Country Kings at the Cuero National Guard Armory auditorium, circa 1970.  
(L-R) Jim Loving, Johnny Naunheim, Richard Faircloth, Kathy Dell, and Jerry Hamp. Photo courtesy of Dorothy Allsbrook.





*The Country Kings in front of their 1948 General Motors custom coach, a.k.a. "the Freight Train."  
(L-R) Jim Loving, Richard Faircloth, Pee Wee Pittman, Johnny Naunheim, Don Crockett, and Kathy Dell, 1973.  
Photo courtesy of Dorothy Allsbrook.*

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General Motors bus from long-time Central Texas bandleader James Arthur Heap. Heap and his Taylor, Texas-based group, Jimmy Heap and the Melody Masters, had toured all over the state since forming in 1946. The popular Heap band, well-known "from the dance halls of Texas to the nightclubs of Nevada," had hits with such songs as "The Wild Side of Life" and "Release Me," which charted in the Top Five in 1953. Heap's tour bus had become a familiar sight in South Texas, but now it would be emblazoned with the new name "Kathy Dell with the Country Kings."<sup>38</sup>

The newly-formed band soon began touring in style. Heap had customized the GM bus by having several seats removed and six bunk beds installed. These modifications made traveling to jobs more comfortable than ever before for the Country Kings, but it also had a downside, as Dell would learn. Accustomed to being in charge, she regularly insisted on driving the large coach herself and once said "It was like a freight train and I did all the driving. I was scared to let them ol' boys drive." Only once did she let another band member drive the bus. Unfortunately, he became lost and got the bus stuck late at night on a narrow rural road not wide enough to turn around on.<sup>39</sup>

As the result of rising fuel prices in the mid-1970s, Dell sold the bus in order to help finance her second record. Dell and Naunheim had already made one 45 rpm record in the fall of 1969, using Faircloth's Country Kings band. Produced by a small San Antonio label, Brazos Records, it featured the song, "You've Still Got a Place in My Heart," an old hit written by Leon Payne, "The Blind Balladeer" from Alba, Texas. The B-side featured one of Naunheim's original compositions, "Footprints

on the Moon." Both sides received some local radio airplay, but the record was never a commercial success.<sup>40</sup>

In December 1974, Dell found an opportunity to record with the Cherokee Cowboys, Texas-born singing star Ray Price's former band, now led by guitarist Charlie Harris. The group, at that time based in San Antonio, hired itself out to anyone willing to pay to record with them. This arrangement had obvious drawbacks, but it kept the musicians busy while generating additional revenue between bigger jobs. On December 28, 1974, the Cherokee Cowboys, along with producer Jerry Connell, drove to Beeville for a recording session with Dell, who had booked time in a four-track studio called the Attic. The only such studio in the area, the Attic was located above a music store owned by her drummer, Richard Faircloth, and was operated by Harry Linder, a local electronics technician from nearby Chase Field Naval Air Station.<sup>41</sup>

The Cherokee Cowboys, considered to be among the top sidemen available in country music at the time, were not looking forward to the recording session, but they needed the money. Their recent recording experiences with amateurs who simply wanted to make a "demo" and pay for the prestige of playing with the renowned band had been disappointing. Cherokee Records producer, Jerry Connell, recalled that on the drive to Beeville for the recording session, the consensus of the band was that Dell, a "hick from Cuero," would be just another untalented amateur.<sup>42</sup>

Soon after the recording session began, however, the band's assessment of Dell quickly changed. During the first warm-up song, bassist Peter Burke stopped playing abruptly and

announced that they should start over. Impressed by how good Dell sounded, he said, "Man, this gal can swing it!" The session took more than five hours, as Dell and the others worked to get the best possible sound they could. On a hunch, producer Jerry Connell had brought along a trio of backup vocalists. Dale Diser and his wife, June, along with Jeanette Kamack, provided solid harmonies behind Dell's soulful singing. The group recorded "It's Over," a song written by Jo Dell Gannon, a Beeville schoolteacher. After the recording session, Connell sent the master tape to San Antonio "to be mixed down from four channels to two for stereo," and he placed an order for one thousand copies of the 45 rpm to be made on the Cherokee Records label.<sup>43</sup>

As soon as the newly-pressed records arrived a few weeks later, Dell began mailing copies to radio disc jockeys throughout South Texas. She sold others at gigs, gave some away to club owners, and placed others in local jukeboxes. "It's Over" got regional

Although she never became famous nationally, Dell continued to be popular regionally, and she promoted her Texas heritage proudly. At times, she performed with an ad hoc group called Texas Heritage, which reflected her eclectic tastes and her willingness to embrace people and music from other ethnic groups. At a typical performance, Texas Heritage would play "Pollander" waltzes and schottisches and Texas "two-step" shuffles, along with Tex-Mex songs and almost anything else audiences requested. Through it all, she still considered herself primarily a country artist, and she often used the motto "Proudly Keeping the Country in Texas" on posters and handbills promoting her upcoming performances.<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps nothing pleased Kathy Dell more than those occasions in which she was able to combine her cowgirl skills with her musical talent at public performances. Her bands entertained hundreds of revelers at Cuero's annual Turkey Trot street dances,

*Through it all, she still considered herself primarily a country artist, and she often used the motto "Proudly Keeping the Country in Texas" on posters and handbills promoting her upcoming performances.*

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radio airplay in the following months, and fans started requesting it at area dance halls when Dell and the Country Kings played. On hearing the four tracks done at the recording session, Texas music historian Kevin Coffey recently commented:

Dell has a strong voice — and she's so typically Texan a stylist. A really nice, cutting voice. You hear it and the band and think of a time and place. And by that I don't mean it's dated, because it's pretty timeless stuff. But there were a lot of working bands like that in those days, way before it became cool to be 'retro'... bands that basically ignored the national trends and just played tough, Texas dance hall music, somewhere between western swing and pretty hard core country. That's sort of what I thought when I heard it...that area, that style. Tough, very Texan, and pretty irresistible.<sup>44</sup>

Except for occasions when Dell backed others during Attic recording sessions, the four 45 rpm sides that she recorded with the Cherokee Cowboys make up her total commercial output. She never made an album, because it was too expensive, and she never received an offer to sign a contract with an established recording company. She once traveled to Nashville for a long-scheduled meeting with a record producer, but at the last moment canceled because of a family emergency back in Cuero.<sup>45</sup>

and she played for large groups of trail riders that camped near Cuero on their way to the San Antonio Livestock Show and Rodeo every February. Each year, Dell would saddle up her Palomino gelding, Pevo, and join the trail riders, entertaining them along the way with nightly shows that allowed the riders to unwind from the day's long journey. These long rides on horseback with chuck wagons, buckboards, and nightly campfires gave Dell a chance to revisit the cowgirl lifestyle that she loved so much and to entertain entire groups of men, women, and children with her cowboy songs, yodeling, and dance music, for which she had become well-known throughout the region.<sup>47</sup>

Along with friend and former rodeo colleague, Jackie Flowers, Dell regularly attended the induction ceremonies hosted annually by the Cowgirl Hall of Fame and Museum, at that time located in Hereford, Texas. In 1987, following the Hall of Fame's induction of Patsy Montana, Dell's childhood singing idol, Dell, prompted by Flowers, took the stage with guitar in hand to sing her borrowed signature song, "I Want to Be a Cowboy's Sweetheart."<sup>48</sup> Although Dell had sung the tune countless times before, this time she was doing it for the woman who had written it and made it famous so many years earlier. Midway through Dell's performance, Montana rose from her seat to stand before the low stage directly in front of her. When Dell finished singing, Montana took the microphone and told the audience that Dell's impressive rendition had made Montana feel as if she had actually experienced seeing herself perform the popular tune.<sup>49</sup>



By the mid-1970s, Dell was incorporating more elements of Tejano music into her performances in order to attract an ever wider audience. In 1976, after Richard Faircloth and the Country Kings went their own way, she formed a new band called Rawhide, the English translation of *cuero*, as a way to honor her home town. After performing at annual *pachangas* sponsored by two Mexican-American Catholic churches — Our Lady of Guadalupe in Cuero and Our Lady of Sorrows in Victoria — Dell hired a new drummer and bass player who were members of those congregations. By playing these day-long gatherings, which featured food booths, games, music, dancing, and other activities, Rawhide quickly expanded its fan base and soon began performing elsewhere throughout the Mexican-American community.<sup>50</sup>

Among other events, Rawhide played at several *quinceañeras*, the traditional social debut for fifteen-year-old Mexican-American girls. These often were large celebrations that began with a solemn, wedding-like chapel ceremony followed by a reception for family and friends. Always lively, these parties include food, music, and dancing and may go on for

By including these musicians and this more ethnically-diverse music in its repertoire, Rawhide helped to break new ground by promoting the cultural cross-fertilization of Texas music. Taking this eclectic mix even further, Dell eventually hired another Mexican-American drummer, David Aguayo, who added a rock-and-roll dimension to the band and even performed a "Fats" Domino medley. Although Dell's rural audiences wanted a more traditional country sound, her urban audiences were very accepting of the cross-cultural approach that the band took in its performances. Somehow, Dell managed to balance these diverse tastes, and Rawhide remained a favorite at both traditional country venues, as well as at Mexican-American festivals, weddings, and *quinceañeras*.<sup>53</sup>

Dell toured with her band regularly from the late 1950s well into the 1980s, playing not only paying gigs, but also putting on free shows at public schools, senior citizen events, nursing homes, retirement and birthday parties, and local benefits for charitable causes. Perhaps most fittingly, the final job her band was scheduled to play happened to be at her church's annual picnic. Dell had grown up in Saint Michael's Catholic Church

### *Among other events, Rawhide played at several quinceañeras, the traditional social debut for fifteen-year-old Mexican-American girls.*

hours. Rawhide also played at wedding receptions, as well as anniversary and birthday parties organized by members of the Mexican-American Catholic congregations in Cuero and Victoria. For many of these performances, Dell hired Cuero bassist, Tony Gonzales, who specialized in singing the hits of country superstar Johnny Rodriguez, from Sabinal, Texas, including "You Always Come Back To Hurting Me," "That's The Way Love Goes," and "Just Get Up And Close The Door." Gonzales, who, like Rodriguez, easily alternated between singing in English and Spanish, soon became a popular addition to the band, especially for the many appearances the group made at events within the Mexican-American community.<sup>51</sup>

Rawhide also played a number of other Mexican-American songs, including "Alla en el Rancho Grande." This was a traditional ballad that had been recorded by a number of artists, including a San Benito, Texas-born singer named Baldemar Huerta. Huerta, who used the stage name "Freddy Fender," began his career in 1961 singing rock and roll as the "Bebop Kid." He went on to have two No. 1 country hits in 1975 with "Before the Next Teardrop Falls" and its follow-up, "Wasted Days And Wasted Nights." Because Kathy Dell's new drummer, Damacio Lopez, looked and sounded very much like Freddy Fender, he sang many of the star's hits when Dell's group performed.<sup>52</sup>

of Cuero and attended regularly throughout her life until health problems prevented her from going.<sup>54</sup>

Dell continued performing into the mid-1990s, playing duet shows on occasion with her closest friend and guitarist, Johnny Naunheim. On October 17 and 18, 1998, however, a natural disaster helped put an end to her musical career. That weekend a massive rain storm brought a catastrophic deluge to a number of towns along the Guadalupe River flood plain, including Cuero, where nearly two feet of rain fell overnight. Along with countless other homes in the area, the first floor of the Dell family home was under water for several days. All of Dell's audio equipment, guitars, songbooks, and costumes were destroyed. The devastating losses included most of her old rodeo gear, outfits, saddles, and tack, as well, since they were stored in a nearby out-building. Fortunately, she had kept some items at the music store in town where they were safe. These included her well-worn Silvertone guitar, a photo album, a few newspaper clippings, and a handful of event posters from her music and rodeo careers. These material losses certainly were difficult, but the emotional impact on the flood's survivors, including Dell, also was devastating.<sup>55</sup>

Despite the challenges, Dell stayed busy operating the Cuero Music Company and driving every weekday morning to nearby

Westhoff for the U. S. Postal Service to deliver and pick up mail for the tiny hamlet and its rural residents. The job paid a modest stipend and helped keep her occupied, but the flood had taken an immeasurable emotional and physical toll. Health problems increased for Dell as high blood pressure and "rodeo knees" plagued her. Her last musical appearance was in June 2000 for the Pilgrim Country Opry in Gonzales. She sang, "I Want to Be a Cowboy's Sweetheart" and "Out on the Texas Plains," both of which "brought forth cheers and much applause."<sup>56</sup>

Ask nearly anyone in the Crossroads region over the age of 30 if they have ever heard of Kathy Dell, and you are likely to get a smile, nod, and maybe a story or two. Recollections of her might include hearing her yodel a cowboy tune on the radio when they were kids or dancing to her band at the Turkey Trot street dances. Others might recall a *pachanga* when she and the band played authentic Tex-Mex songs to the smell of mesquite-smoked barbecue or steamy homemade tamales. Some might reminisce about sipping cold Lone Star long necks at Schroeder Hall while an energetic Dell band serenaded dancers with a smooth Texas-Czech waltz. Still others might remember hearing her belt out hardcore honky-tonk tunes for weary oil field workers and sun-burned shrimpers at raunchy little dives like the Snake Pit in

Port Lavaca or the Hi-Fi Club near Victoria.<sup>57</sup>

Toward the end of her life, Kathy Dell did begin to receive public recognition for her long career in entertainment. In spring 2004, the Chisholm Trail Heritage Museum in Cuero honored Dell by hosting an exhibition of archival rodeo photography, which included a number of pictures from Dell's riding career along with some of her mementos from those years. The Cuero State Bank also officially recognized Dell and her many accomplishments with a public ceremony and reception.

Tragically, a pair of strokes in late 2005 left Dell in a Cuero nursing home, essentially unresponsive and unable to communicate. The ever-loyal Johnny Naunheim sat with her daily while close cousins also visited her regularly. On occasion, former band members and fans stopped by to say hello. The light that burned brightly in Dell for so long finally went out on October 29, 2007, but memories of it still shine in the faces of those who knew her and especially the many fortunate ones who experienced her dynamic live performances. In spite of a lack of fame in the conventional sense, this singular woman bequeathed significant social and cultural legacies to Texas and its music history over a lifetime of dedicated public performances. She helped to break new ground for Texas women in the world of music.★

## Notes

1. For a collection of interviews with many contemporary women in Texas music, see Kathleen Hudson, *Women in Texas Music: Stories and Songs* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007).
2. As Guadalupe San Miguel explains in, *Tejano Proud: Tex-Mex Music in the Twentieth Century* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002), 5, "Tejano is a particular form of border music. Its unique sounds were created or performed by Tejanos living along the Rio Grande border, and by those on the metaphorical border of two distinct cultural worlds. The concept of the border in this study includes two dimensions, physical and metaphysical." Like its broader American counterpart, Texas music has historically enjoyed the commingling of its ethnic influences. Those most notable contributing Central Texas cultures have been Anglo, Czech/German, African American, and Mexican American. Paula Felps, *Lone Stars and Legends: The Story of Texas Music* (Plano, Texas: Republic of Texas Press, 2001), 193. For an overview of the ethnic roots of Texas music history, see Gary Hartman, "The Roots Run Deep: An Overview of Texas Music History," in Lawrence Clayton and Joe W. Specht, eds., *The Roots of Texas Music* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), 3-36.
3. Dorothy Alsbrook, interview with author, March 4, 2006, Cuero, Texas; Katherine Williams, interview with author, March 4, 2006, Cuero, Texas, and Margaret Ellinghausen, interview with author, March 4, 2006, Cuero, Texas.
4. DeWitt County Historical Commission, *The History of DeWitt County, Texas*, (Dallas: Curtiss Media Corporation, 1991), 119.
5. Quoted in *ibid.*
6. Larry Willoughby, *Texas Rhythm, Texas Rhyme* (Austin: Texas Monthly Press, 1984), 18. From 1931 to 1940, the 500,000 watt, Rio Grande border radio station, XERA, was owned and operated by Dr. John R. Brinkley's Villa Acuña Broadcasting Company. The powerful station broadcast some of America's most beloved country music entertainers throughout the 1930s, including Patsy Montana, the Carter Family, and many others. On the history of border radio, see Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford, *Border Radio: Quacks, Yodelers, Pitchmen, Psychics, and Other Amazing Broadcasters of the American Airwaves*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).
7. "KCFH Holds Initial Broadcast," *Cuero Record*, (March 2, 1949), 1; Author's interview with John Naunheim, March 3, 2006, Cuero, Texas. Bill C. Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 199, points out that by 1949 radio shows using live country performers were broadcast on at least 650 stations in the United States.



WOAI, San Antonio's powerful 50,000 watt commercial radio station which began operations in September of 1922, blanketed much of South/Central Texas with its broadcast signal. The marriage of country music and live performance broadcasts culminated politically in the upset election of border radio huckster and swing band promoter, W. Lee "Pappy" O'Daniel. By exploiting his radio broadcast popularity, he was elected governor of Texas in 1938 and 1940 then U. S. Senator in 1941.

8. "KCFH Holds Initial Broadcast," *Cuero Record*, March 2, 1949, 1; DeWitt County Historical Commission, *The History of DeWitt County*, 119.
9. Dell quoted in "Singing Cowgirl's Rodeo Days," *The Victoria Advocate*, May 15, 1988, 6.
10. John Naunheim, interview with author, March 3, 2006. In Greg Bowen, "Rodeo Rider, Country Singer," *Cuero Record*, August 6, 1983, 5, Dell reportedly noted that local girls who worked in that same dime store also made \$15 but for working eight hours a day, five days a week.
11. Ivan M. Tribe, "Johnnie Lee Wills," in Barry McCloud, ed., *Definitive Country*, The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Country Music and Its Performers (New York: The Berkeley Publishing Group, 1995), 887.
12. John Naunheim, interview with author, March 3, 2006.
13. On Red River Dave, see Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 299, and Felps, *Lone Stars and Legends*, 90.
14. For a brief overview of the history of the Girl's Rodeo Association, which began in 1948 and is now called the Women's Professional Rodeo Association, see Mary Lou LeCompte, "Women's Professional Rodeo Association," Handbook of Texas Online, <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles>, and the association's website, <http://www.wpra.com/wprahistory>.
15. "Lucyle Cowey Holds World Title As Saddle Bronc Rider," *Cuero Record*, November 15, 1951; author's interview with John Naunheim, March 3, 2006. Cowey's past career as a pilot impressed Dell so much that she took flying lessons for a while. It was costly, so she learned enough to fly the solo, cross-country requirement for a license and then quit. Dell had proved to herself that she could become a pilot if she wanted to, and that was apparently enough for her.
16. Jackie Hayden Flowers, interview with author, February 26, 2006, Boerne, Texas; Dell quoted in "Rodeo Rider, Country Singer," *Cuero Record*, August 6, 1983.
17. John Naunheim, interview with author, March 3, 2006. On Texas "dude ranches," see Diana J. Kleiner, "Dude Ranching," Handbook of Texas Online, <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles>.
18. John Naunheim, interview with author, March 3, 2006.
19. Ellis Fellers, telephone interview with author, April 1, 2006, Austin, Texas. Since the historic Victor recording session of the Carter Family in 1927, female vocalists had become an integral and accepted part of "hillbilly," or country, music. As a result, the practiced and confident Dell was an easy fit with the Colorado River Boys. Austin's own Dolores and the Blue Bonnet Boys had previously been very popular in that area, thus providing Dell with a local role model and inspiration. See Mary A. Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann, *Finding Her Voice: The Saga of Women in Country Music* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1993), 34. At the end of the nineteenth century, Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show alumnus Billy McGinty started one of the first cowboy bands to feature a female singer, his wife, Mollie. In doing so, he launched an innovation which began a long tradition that produced many now-famous cowgirl music stars, such as Patsy Montana, Texas Ruby, Dale Evans, and others.
20. Jean A. Boyd, *The Jazz of the Southwest: An Oral History of Western Swing* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 31; Locke quoted in Geronimo Trevino III, *Dance Halls and Last Calls: A History of Texas Country Music* (Plano, Texas: Republic of Texas Press, 2002, 165.
21. Ibid., 26; Rick Koster, *Texas Music* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1998), 20. On the growing popularity of honky-tonks during the Great Depression, see Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 153-154.
22. Janet Bird, "Al Dexter," in Barry McCloud, ed., *Definitive Country: The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Country Music and Its Performers* (New York: The Berkeley Publishing Group, 1995), 229. Ernest Tubb, favorite son of Crisp, Texas, made honky-tonk songs even more popular during World War II with no fewer than eight Top Five hits, including "Walking the Floor Over You," "Soldier's Last Letter," "Tomorrow Never Comes" and "It's Been So Long Darling." See Barry McCloud, "Ernest Tubb," in McCloud, ed., *Definitive Country*, 118-119. The 1950s are regarded as the golden age of honky-tonk music as represented by Hank Williams and other well-known singers, including Texans Floyd Tillman, Lefty Frizzell, and George Jones. Williams personified the post-war style with his mournful voice and lyrics of tragedy, infidelity, and loss. For a brief discussion of his life and career, see Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 239-243.
23. John Naunheim, interview with author, March 3, 2006; Dell quoted in "Kathy Dell...Not Yet A Cowboy's Sweetheart," *Cuero Record*, August 11, 1964, 1.
24. John Naunheim, interview with author, March 3, 2006. Dell remained primarily dedicated to her parents and continued to care for them in the family homestead until both passed away in the late 1980s.
25. A few Dell band performances were recorded live on cassette tapes which are now in the author's possession. These tapes capture her on-stage personality, revealing how interactive she was with her audiences.
26. Richard Faircloth, interview with author, March 17, 2006, Victoria, Texas.
27. Dell used the term, "Pollander," during a special performance held for her 40th birthday and Fourth of July party at her Cuero home on July 4, 1972. Cassette tape in author's possession.
28. John Naunheim, interview with author, March 3, 2006.

During an automobile ride with Mr. Naunheim to visit some of the sites where the Dell bands played over the years, I was amazed at the number of venues he showed me in just one afternoon of travel in the rural vicinity of Cuero alone.

29. John Naunheim, interview with author, March 3, 2006.
30. Richard Faircloth, interview with author, March 17, 2006.
31. Ibid.
32. John Naunheim, interview with author, March 3, 2006. Dell was tested on another job by a hard-drinking steel guitarist who joined the group briefly. He was a good musician, but during a job at the Kenedy VFW Hall, he drank whiskey throughout the first two sets and soon became careless in his playing. When Dell unplugged his amplifier in the middle of a song, he walked off the bandstand, went to the bar adjoining the dance floor, and continued to drink. As he got more obnoxious, the hall manager called the sheriff, who arrested and jailed the drunken musician. That ended his time with the Dell band, as she tolerated no such behavior. Richard Faircloth, interview with author, March 17, 2006.
33. John Naunheim, interview with author, March 3, 2006; Jennifer McDowell, "Booth's Trading Post," *Texas Highways* (Austin: Texas Department of Transportation, August, 1981), 44.
34. Quoted in McDowell, "Booth's Trading Post," 44; John Naunheim, interview with author, March 3, 2006.
35. John Naunheim, interview with author, March 3, 2006; Barry McCloud, "James O'Gwynn," in McCloud, ed., *Definitive Country*, 597; Ivan M. Tribe, "Frankie Miller," in McCloud, ed., *Definitive Country*, 542; Trevino, *Dance Halls and Last Calls*, 203. Schroeder Hall's list of performers reads like a country music hall of fame. The historic 6,000 square foot dance floor, built in 1935, has hosted Bob Wills, Ray Price, Mel Tillis, Faron Young, Willie Nelson, and many others. Located about fifteen miles east of Goliad, it still hosts top performers on weekends. Yorktown's Cotton Patch Club was another large dance hall where the early Square D Ranch Hands were popular.
36. John Naunheim, interview with author, March 3, 2006.
37. Richard Faircloth, interview with author, March 17, 2006. It was in the Cuero Music Company that my daughter and I met Katherine Dell by sheer chance during a spring break trip to the coast in March, 1999. On the wall behind the counter of this small store were a few photographs of Dell the bull rider and Country Kings band leader. Following a short conversation about her rodeo and music careers, Dell closed the shop for lunch and we drove back to Austin with a copy of her 45 record in hand. The brief visit inspired the research that led to this article.
38. Ivan M. Tribe, "Jimmy Heap," in McCloud, ed., *Definitive Country*, 379.
39. Butch Keith, telephone interview with author, April 3, 2006; Dell quoted in "Singing Cowgirl's Rodeo Days," *The Victoria Advocate*, May 15, 1988, 7. On that occasion, the band had finished a job at The Wagon Wheel, a club near Canyon Dam above New Braunfels. Dell was unusually tired, so fiddle player "Dutch" Wells took the driver's seat while everyone else climbed into a bunk to sleep. Wells drove for awhile, but then stopped the bus and began yelling for Dell to drive. He had taken a wrong fork off the notoriously twisted and curved River Road between New Braunfels and Canyon Lake. With Naunheim walking behind as a guide, Dell reversed the bus down the lane until she could turn it around. She then drove the big bus all the way home to Cuero while the band members slept. Richard Faircloth, interview with author, March 17, 2006.
40. Richard Faircloth, interview with author, March 17, 2006; Barry McCloud, "Leon Payne," in McCloud, ed., *Definitive Country*, 1995, 627. Payne, born in 1917, had become one of the state's most prolific song writers by the time of his death in 1969. A 1935 graduate of the Texas State School for the Blind in Austin, he worked with Bob Wills and many others. Payne purportedly wrote several thousand songs in his career, several of which were hits that either he or other artists recorded.
41. Jerry Connell, interview with author, March 11, 2006; Judy Telge, "Recording Scene Brings Talent," *Bee County Independent*, January 9, 1975, 3. By then, Price had moved from a classic honky-tonk style toward one using core band members along with orchestras supplied locally per play date. Requiring twenty or more musicians made him harder to book, so there were simply fewer jobs for Price at the time. Rich Kienzle, *Southwest Shuffle: Pioneers of Honky Tonk, Western Swing and Country Jazz* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 178.
42. Jerry Connell, interview with author, March 11, 2006; Telge, "Recording Scene Brings Talent," 3. The highly regarded band was comprised of well-known steel guitarist Jimmy Day, who had originally played for Elvis Presley, fiddler Cal Berry, a former member of San Antonio's legendary Texas Top Hands, and band leader/guitarist Charlie Harris, bassist Pete Burke, and percussionist Bob Collins.
43. Jerry Connell, interview with author, March 11, 2006; Telge, "Recording Scene Brings Talent," 3.
44. Kevin Coffey e-mail to author, March 28, 2006. Fortunately, a handful of the old 45s survived in the Dell family. A copy is now archived in the Center for Texas Music History, Texas State University-San Marcos.
45. Dorothy Alsbroom, interview with author, March 4, 2006.
46. John Naunheim, interview with author, March 3, 2006; Kathy Dell poster, Texas Heritage Show, Cuero American Legion Hall, Saturday, April 7th, 1982 (original poster in author's possession).
47. John Naunheim, interview with author, March 3, 2006.
48. Jackie Hayden Flowers, interview with author, February 26, 2006; Judith Karst, "Girls With Grit," *Texas Highways Magazine* (Austin: Texas Department of Transportation, August, 1989), 30. In 2002, the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame relocated to Fort Worth.



49. Jackie Hayden Flowers, interview with author, February 26, 2006.
50. As Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 152, points out, "Musicians who hoped to prosper playing for dances in the broad territory extending south, east, and west from Austin, Texas, learned quickly that they must be prepared to play anything from "Alla en el Rancho Grande" and "Herr Schmidt" to "Jole Blon" and "Cotton Eyed Joe."
51. Ramiro Burr, "Rodriguez, Johnny," *The Billboard Guide to Tejano and Regional Mexican Music* (New York: Billboard Books, 1999), 180, points out that Rodriguez, despite the popular impact of Freddy Fender's 1975 country hit, "Before the Next Teardrop Falls," was "the first Mexican-American country superstar." "You Always Come Back to Hurting Me," released by Rodriguez on Mercury Records, hit Number One on the Billboard Top Country Singles Sales chart in March, 1973.
52. Ramiro Burr, "Fender, Freddy," *The Billboard Guide to Tejano and Regional Mexican Music*, 91. Fender became one of the first of only a few successful Mexican-American crossover artists in the mid-1970s. He began his singing career in the Rio Grande Valley by covering Elvis Presley's hits in Spanish. San Miguel, *Tejano Proud*, 71. San Antonio-born Leonardo "Flaco" Jiménez, a conjunto accordionist, entered the small circle of other major Tejano crossover musicians when he joined folk guitarist, Ry Cooder, on his 1976 album, *Chicken Skin Music*. Ramiro Burr, "Flaco Jiménez," *The Billboard Guide to Tejano and Regional Mexican Music*, 119-120.
53. John Naunheim, interview with author, March 3, 2006. The Tejano/Anglo music fusion that began in South Texas during the late 1950s and 1960s initially took place in rock and roll or rhythm and blues, but as the music of Fender and Rodriguez indicates, it later shaped country music, too. San Miguel, *Tejano Proud*, 71. On similar lyrical themes in honky tonk and rural-based conjunto music, see Dan W. Dickey, "Música Norteña," Handbook of Texas Online, [www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/MM/xbm1.html](http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/MM/xbm1.html).
54. D. Alsbrook, K. Williams, and M. Ellinghausen, interviews with author, March 4, 2006. According to rodeo cohort and life-long friend, Jackie Hayden Flowers, Dell's deep religious faith was the bedrock upon which her personal life and twin careers were founded. Regardless of fatigue, injury, or weather, Dell faithfully attended church every Sunday morning whenever she was on the road. Jackie Hayden Flowers, interview with author, February 26, 2006.
55. John Naunheim, interview with author, March 3, 2006.
56. Gonzales *Inquirer*, "A Welcome Surprise," June 16, 2000, 14; John Naunheim, interview with author, March 3, 2006.
57. John Naunheim, interview with author, March 3, 2006.



## Jazz Mavericks of the Lone Star State

by Dave Oliphant. (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2007), Pp. 256, ISBN-13: 978-0-292-71495-3 (cloth), ISBN-13: 978-0-292-71496-0 (paper).

Dave Oliphant is well recognized as perhaps the most passionate chronicler of the Lone Star State and its relationship to jazz. His 1996 monograph, *Texan Jazz*, remains the most detailed history on the subject. Oliphant's new book, *Jazz Mavericks*, features twelve previously published essays and four new articles, all examining topics that the author believes were not adequately addressed in his earlier book.

The first four chapters — “Jazz Mavericks of the Lone Star State,” “The Roots of Texan Jazz,” “From Bebop to Hard Bop and Beyond,” and “Texas Bop Messengers to the World” — provide very good overviews of some of the most significant Texas contributions to jazz history. The following essays delve into more specific jazz-related topics, including jazz's influence on the development of western swing, the role of British fans in bringing worldwide recognition to Texans in jazz, the ways in which European and American discographers helped facilitate research into Texas jazz, and the little-known collaborations between Texan and Wisconsin jazz musicians. One chapter, “San Marcos in Jazz History,” eulogizes the Central Texas town's tremendously influential son, trombonist and electric guitar pioneer Eddie Durham, while two chapters on Ornette Coleman explore the Fort Worth free jazz pioneer's enormous impact on the long-term development of jazz.

Oliphant's interest in Texas jazz is broad-ranging and all-encompassing, as is reflected in his inclusion of jazz literature. “Jazz in Literature” looks at poems and short fiction pieces inspired by various Texas jazz artists. “The Alchemy of Jazz” examines two recent publications, the reissue of Studs Turkel's 1957 classic *Giants of Jazz*, and Alfred Appel Jr.'s *Jazz Modernism from Ellington and Armstrong to Matisse and Joyce*, which includes Vernon-born trombonist Jack Teagarden, Dallas trumpeter

Oran “Hot Lips” Page, and a painting of Thelonius Monk done by a Texas artist.

In another essay on jazz literature, Oliphant explores the crucial role of Austin-based folklorist, Alan Lomax, in documenting the life of Jelly Roll Morton, the legendary New Orleans pianist and self-proclaimed “inventor” of jazz. “A Texas Take on Ken Burns' *Jazz*” applauds the PBS documentary film series' but also points out Burns's glaring omissions of the contributions of so many Texas artists to the development of jazz.

The essays on western swing are useful introductions to this “Jazz of the Southwest” for those jazz aficionados who, like Oliphant, may have never before fully appreciated this unique musical hybrid which borrows so heavily from jazz, country, blues, ragtime, pop, mariachi, swing, and other musical genres found throughout the Southwest. Oliphant's enthusiasm for his own late-in-life discovery of western swing is apparent, although he concludes that it generally does not equal contemporaneous jazz, in terms of complexity and the technical dexterity required of its performers.

Oliphant does attempt to tie Texas jazz into other larger regional musical traditions, especially the blues. Although he suggests that Texas jazz players were perhaps more strongly influenced by blues elements than their contemporaries outside of the state, a clear connection between a unique Texas blues tradition and Texas jazz is never fully established. A comparative analysis of Texan and non-Texan versions of the same jazz tunes might have helped bolster Oliphant's argument in this regard.

Dave Oliphant belongs to the school of jazz critics who are in it exclusively because of their deep appreciation for the art form. His sense of wonder at the beauty and complexity of this uniquely American musical genre pervades most of the writings, regardless of the obscurity of the topic or the angle from which he approaches it. This book is no exception. It provides both useful overviews of major Texan contributions to jazz, as well as interesting angular explorations of specific aspects of its history and historiography.

— Ajay Kalra



## Bonfire of Roadmaps

by Joe Ely, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), Brad and Michelle Moore Roots Music Series, 208 pages with illustrations. ISBN-10: 0292716532 ISBN-13: 978-0292716537

Joe Ely's *Bonfire of Roadmaps* is a road trip without a road map. Ely, using excerpts from his journals on the road, structures his memories in quatrains, using the ballad method to tell his story in this compelling new book. The accompanying CD helps the reader experience the oral history contained in a collection of memories related by the popular Texas singer-songwriter.

In the spirit of Walt Whitman, Jack Kerouac, and Allen Ginsberg, Ely observes the world around him in poignant detail, reporting on wars, politics, history, and the mythology of American culture. His allusions to literature, art, philosophy, and politics help spark a curiosity that makes one want to experience the same sort of adventures on the road. Like the ultimate hero in Joseph Campbell's *Hero's Journey*, Joe Ely had to leave home in order to find home. This lifelong pattern of venturing out into the world only to return home a bit older and wiser each time has given Ely the skills and understanding to weave together a web of meaning through his poetry.

At one point Ely muses, "I look into the eyes of the audience in the dark/ And I see a longing for emotional fulfillment/ Not to be confused with intellectual awareness/ Like concepts, which turn good men into critics" (135). Commenting on both the highs and lows of spending much of one's life traveling, Ely says "The road will balance tomorrow" (142), and "These are the moments we live for/ All else is just Highway and Howdy do" (152).

Similar to Kerouac, who talked of life "from the womb to the tomb," Ely documents his decades-long journey in terms of near-constant motion. Roads, highways, wind, trucks,

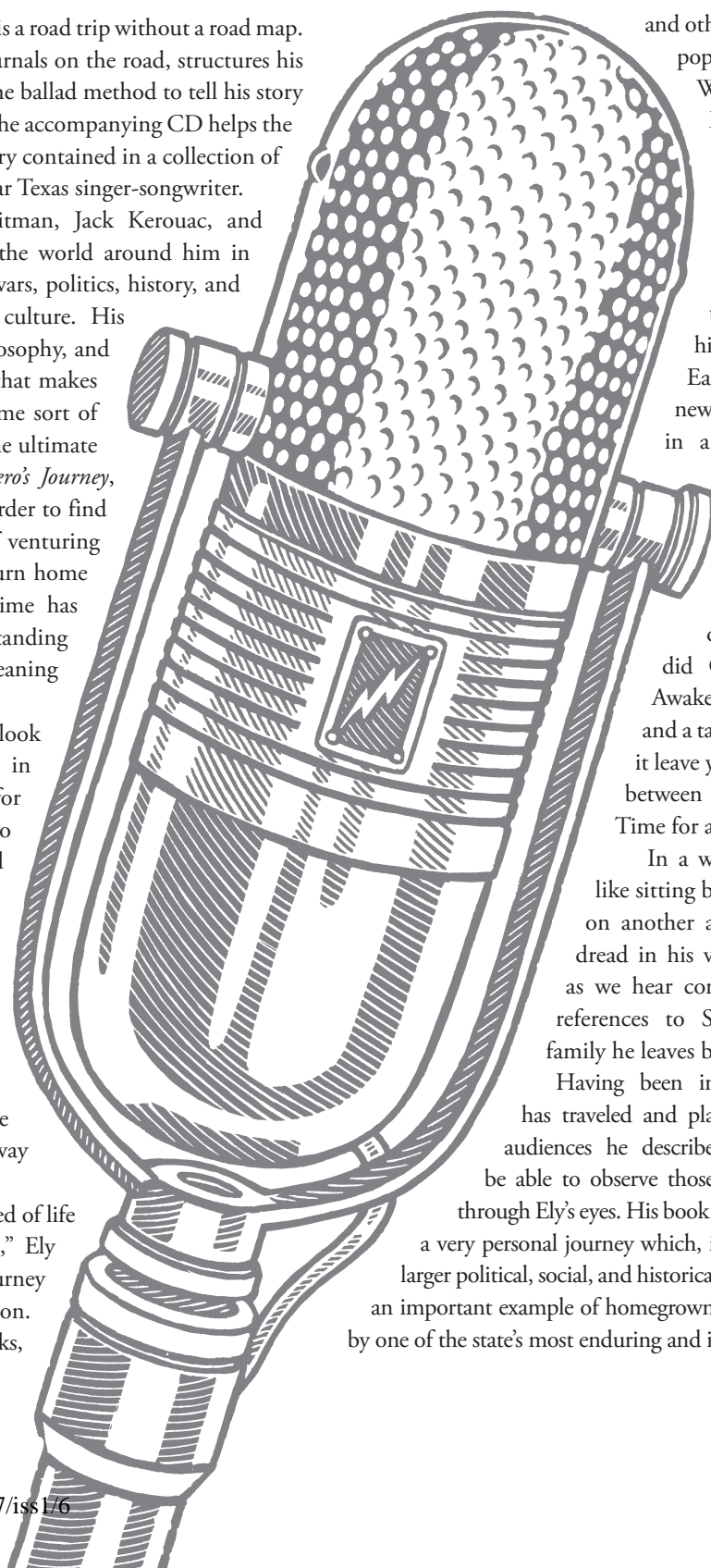
and other symbols of restlessness populate his verses. Also, like Whitman and Ginsberg, Ely talks to the people, telling them what his eyes have witnessed. He speaks of his beliefs about life, death, love, and spirit. All the while, the road goes on, as does his own personal evolution. Each tour brings with it new memories, documented in a poetic style with the structure changing at times to match the new content.

Ely's final quatrain invites us to consider quantum physics. "When did Consciousness slap you Awake?/ And toss you a Mirror and a tank of Laughing Gas/ Did it leave you on the beach, peering between Stars?/ Looking back in Time for a Measly Clue" (192).

In a way, reading this book is like sitting beside Ely as he heads out on another adventure. We sense the dread in his voice upon leaving, even as we hear consistent and affectionate references to Sharon and Maria, the family he leaves behind.

Having been in places where Joe Ely has traveled and played and out among the audiences he describes, it was fascinating to be able to observe those locations and audiences through Ely's eyes. His book carries the reader along on a very personal journey which, in many ways, reflects the larger political, social, and historical issues of our time. This is an important example of homegrown American poetry written by one of the state's most enduring and introspective songwriters.

— Kathleen Hudson



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