

**AN ORAL HISTORY OF TARY OWENS:
TEXAS FOLKLORIST AND MUSICIAN**

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by

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated in memory of Tary Owens, who taught me so much about Texas music, and in memory of my father, John Koeniger—my first history teacher.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

On October 11, 2003, family members and friends of Tary Owens gathered at his eastside Austin home to celebrate his life in a memorial service, a life cut short by cancer on September 21. A soft rain began to fall on the crowd as they found chairs in the backyard, which slopes down in terraces to the banks of the Colorado River. Many of the people gathering for this service had been friends of Owens since his high school years in Port Arthur, Texas, and his college days in Austin. Many in attendance were the same Texas musicians, songwriters, and music industry colleagues who had been so important in Owens's life. All were there to remember and honor the life of a man who loved his family and friends and who contributed throughout his life so much to the preservation and study of Texas music history.

In the *Austin American-Statesman* obituary, Brad Buchholz, who had written articles about Owens in years past, stated that "Tary Owens devoted most of his life to music, though only rarely to his own. The greater mission, to Owens, was to champion the music of forgotten or unsung Texas bluesmen—to put their songs on records, to place them on a stage, to encourage a larger public to celebrate their artistry."¹ Owens began that mission in the 1960s when he attended the University of Texas and studied with

folklore scholars Américo Paredes and Roger Abrahams. Utilizing a Lomax Foundation grant, Owens traveled around Texas recording folk musicians, including guitarists Mance Lipscomb, Freddie King, and Bill Neely, as well as barrelhouse piano players Robert Shaw and Roosevelt T. Williams, the “Grey Ghost.” Twenty years later, Owens reconnected with some of those men, helped resurrect their careers, and recorded their music so the public would come to know these artists again.

The purpose of this thesis is to recount the life of Tary Owens, to document his contributions to Texas music history, to place him in the historical context of other folklorists who have documented American culture through music, and to promote awareness of that legacy to a larger public. The primary research method and resource materials are audiotaped interviews I conducted with Owens from July 2002 through August 2003, and with his family, friends, and colleagues. The long list of music colleagues included Owens’s friendship with Janis Joplin, which began during their high school days in Port Arthur and continued until her death in 1970. In a lifetime spent in the music business, Owens came to know many legendary artists, including Townes Van Zandt, Guy Clark, Kris Kristofferson, Johnny and Edgar Winter, and many other musicians and colleagues who, over the years, helped establish the Austin music scene.

The advantages of and guidelines for using oral history research are outlined in a Texas Historical Commission publication:

Oral history is the collection and recording of personal memoirs as historical documentation. It documents forms of discourse normally not documented and it emphasizes the significance of human experience...Collecting, preserving and sharing oral histories not only transmits knowledge from one generation to the next, it enhances our

¹ Brad Buchholz, “Producer Championed Austin Blues,” *Austin American-Statesman*, 22 September 2001, sec. B, p. 1.

understanding of the past by illuminating personal experience...Oral history is the best method to use...to get an idea not only of what happened, but what past times meant to people and how it felt to be part of those times.²

Because oral history involves personal reminiscences and eyewitness accounts based on an individual's memory, which can be fallible, I have also used additional secondary resource materials to verify factual data and details.

The social, economic, and cultural changes that occurred during the second half of twentieth-century America make this one of the most tumultuous periods in the nation's history. This oral history of Tary Owens provides an eyewitness perspective to that period and explores the contributions Owens made through a lifetime of work to preserve the rich cultural heritage reflected in Texas music.

² "Fundamentals of Oral History: Texas Preservation Guidelines" (Austin: Texas Historical Commission, 2004), 2.

CHAPTER II

EARLY LIFE (1942-1962)

There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in.

- Graham Greene, THE POWER AND THE GLORY

Tary Kelly Owens was born in Toledo, Ohio, on November 6, 1942, less than one year after the United States entered World War II. Shortly after Tary's birth, his father, Louis Owens, a farm boy from East Texas, was drafted into the U.S. Army and went to Georgia for basic training. Mary Charlotte Owens took her infant son and spent the next three years living in a variety of locales, beginning in Georgia close to the army post where Louis trained. After her husband shipped out to fight in the Pacific, Mary moved back and forth from Ohio to southern Illinois to live with her parents, Helen and John Kelly, then to Texas to stay with the Owens Family, and finally back to Ohio. Before Louis's discharge from the service in 1946, Mary took Tary on train trips to visit his father at a variety of army bases where he was posted. These train rides form some of Tary's earliest memories of music and helped shape the direction of his adult life:

When I was first exposed to music, it was big band music on trains, riding trains during World War II, following my father around to various army bases. And my mother and father were big band fans; and my mother would bring me up to the car that the band was on the train. And it seemed like every train had a band on it at the time. And I'd sing with the

band, stuff like, “Cross the Alley from the Alamo”...my parents knew I loved singing and they got me enrolled when I was about three years old in a dancing and singing school in Toledo, Ohio...It was the same school that Teresa Brewer had just gone through...And I was doing that before I was even in school.³

After the war, Mary and Louis returned to Toledo where a second son, Bruce, was born in 1947. Tary started elementary school in Toledo, but by 1951, the family had relocated to Bowling Green, Kentucky, where Louis worked for the Coca-Cola Bottling Company in sales and promotions. In September 1951, two more boys were added to the family with the birth of twins Tim and Ben. Nine months later, the family moved again to Mary’s hometown, the small rural community of Grand Tower, Illinois, on the Mississippi River, about one hundred miles south of St. Louis. The Owens Family went to live with the Kellys to care for Mary’s mother, who had suffered a stroke. Tim Owens reflected on what life was like for the four Owens boys during the five years they lived in Grand Tower:

Tary would have been right at ten years old at the time we moved there. And then on that river there, it’s really kind of a great place for a kid to grow up. You know it’s Huck Finn on the river... There were hills to climb with caves in them. And there were fields up there that had been corn fields or whatever crop they were growing...they would plow some of those fields that had been Indian burial grounds...although later on she [mother] seemed so sophisticated and city wise, she was a country girl at heart and would get out with the boys; she wasn’t afraid. If they picked up a snake to chase her with, she’d pick up a bigger snake to chase them...[The plowing] would turn over all these old Indian arrowheads and artifacts...I figure that’s probably when Tary first started getting into collecting, in that rural America.⁴

³ Tary Owens, interview with author, tape recording, Austin, Texas, 13 September 2002.

⁴ Tim Owens, interview with author, tape recording, Houston, Texas, 13 December 2003.

Tary kept the Indian arrowheads and other artifacts that he began to collect during the five years the family lived in Illinois, sparking an interest in collecting and preserving historical items and information that would continue throughout his life. The passion Tary had for music, both as a performer and music historian, came from his family's heritage. While Tary's parents loved music, neither of them actually played a musical instrument; both grandfathers, however, were accomplished musicians. Tary related the following story of his family's musical heritage:

My Texas grandfather...played every stringed instrument there was and could also play organ, piano, and he had a mandocello, which is a pretty rare stringed instrument...He'd been a dance hall fiddler in the area of Athens and Murchison in East Texas. And apparently his father...the fiddling had been passed down for several generations of Owenses. They were fiddlers in North Carolina and Alabama and Texas...And one of my uncles played in the Light Crust Doughboys. My other grandfather in Illinois had been a drummer on Mississippi riverboats. I always, in my mind, wanted to brag and say he was a jazz musician on the Mississippi River, but what they were playing when he was on the boats wasn't jazz yet...it was about 1914, 1913; they were playing military marches and old favorite sentimental stuff and they would do a show; they would come down the river and stop at every little town that had a landing...put out flyers all over town and then Saturday afternoon have a show and...another matinee show on Sunday.⁵

Putting on a show and performing for an audience were part of Tary's elementary school experiences in Grand Tower. When Tary was in the fourth grade, he said that he and a friend "put together a little show to perform at the school assembly about cowboys and a tap dancer. And we did that, and it became a tradition there at the school that at every weekly assembly I would sing a song."⁶ As a fifth grader the following year, Tary

⁵ Tary Owens, interview with author, 13 September 2002 (Light Crust Doughboys, seminal band for western swing genre [see *Koster Texas Music*]).

⁶ *Ibid.*

was allowed to leave campus for lunch. A small café close to the school had a jukebox, whereas Tary recalled, he and his friends would go to hear music during lunch:

My mother hated country music so it never got played in the house. So when I heard it on this jukebox and this song, Webb Pierce, doing “There Stands the Glass.” And it just took me and I figured that to sing that way you had to hold your nose. So [at the next assembly] I got up there and...started singing, “There Stands the Glass,” and everybody cracked up.⁷

Not long after this, Tary discovered rock and roll. He heard Chuck Berry on the radio singing “Maybeline” and, as Tary described the moment, “I’d never heard anything like that before, and it just took my total attention. There wasn’t anything like that on the radio at all, and I liked it.” Elvis Presley started his musical career in the mid-1950s, and Tary took notice:

I was a big Elvis fan. And then I listened to all the other Elvis imitators that were there. I was a big fan of Gene Vincent and the Blue Caps...by that time I was having favorite groups, favorite entertainers and glued to the Ed Sullivan show, whoever went on. Eddie Cochran, Little Richard, Chuck Berry, Fats Domino were mainly the ones I was interested in. And pretty quickly, I started noticing that the black artists were better than the white ones.⁸

Tary’s musical preferences were not unlike many other youth in the 1950s. Elvis Presley’s rise to stardom and worldwide popularity is linked to how he combined musical genres. Music historian Joe W. Specht describes the uniqueness of Presley’s music: “Many white teens were already in tune with the rhythm and blues sounds that were in the air, but Elvis effortlessly mixed white hillbilly or country music with black R & B like no one before.” Presley’s style of music influenced many other performers, including

⁷ Ibid.

Texas musicians and future Rock and Roll Hall of Famers Buddy Holly and Roy Orbison. During 1955, Elvis made two hundred appearances in fifteen states, most in the South, and, “At least eighty of these, or almost 40%, were in Texas.”⁹

By 1956, the Owens Family was about to make its own move to Texas, after living in Grand Tower for about five years. Tary’s mother helped run a small family owned grocery store in addition to caring for her ailing mother, while his father worked as supervisor on a bridge construction crew. The strain of living together in one house with her parents, husband, and four energetic boys eventually took its toll on Tary’s mother. As Tim Owens remembered, the family decided to move to Beaumont, Texas:

My Aunt Darlene, which is my mother’s sister, and her husband had come down to the Beaumont area looking for work; this was a big petrochemical area and there was a lot of work—machine work and into the refineries. There was just a lot more opportunity in 1956 down here so we moved to Beaumont, where my Dad worked for Beaumont Metal Works.¹⁰

During World War II, Beaumont’s economy prospered with shipbuilding, petrochemicals, and synthetic rubber. The town’s population grew significantly as workers moved to the area to find wartime work. The new boom created overcrowding, “which may have contributed to the Beaumont race riot of 1943,” and “led to the declaration of martial law and the virtual shut-down of the city in June.” Despite these problems, this major Gulf Coast industrial area fostered an economy that continued to grow into the post-war era, attracting Americans from many ethnic, social, and cultural

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Joe W. Specht, “I Forgot to Remember to Forget: Elvis Presley in Texas-1955,” *The Journal of Texas Music History* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 8-9.

¹⁰ Tim Owens, interview with author, 13 December 2003.

backgrounds to the region of Texas known as the “Golden Triangle”—formed by the cities of Beaumont, Orange, and Port Arthur.¹¹

The “Golden Triangle” is rich in history with an ethnic mix that sometimes fostered social tensions, which Tary would experience as a teenager in the late 1950s. The move to Texas was a fortuitous decision, however, for a young man with a growing passion for music, since the Lone Star State would provide the young Owens with a broad array of musical experiences. As writer Rick Koster points out, “Texas has perhaps the most diverse and colorful tradition in American musical history. One would be hard pressed to argue that any state (or city) has made as many significant contributions to as many forms of music as Texas has.”¹² As rich and diverse as the entire state’s musical culture is, the “Golden Triangle,” where Tary and his family settled, is particularly eclectic. This area has been fertile ground for important developments in blues, country, Cajun, zydeco, rock and roll, and many other genres.

The change from life in a small, rural Illinois town to that of the industrial port city of Beaumont, Texas proved dramatic. The blatant racial discrimination Tary experienced troubled him, a fourteen year old in his last year of junior high school. Tary commented on the move and what it meant to him:

My mother didn’t like the town, the town she’d grown up in. She considered it pretty backwards and it was...it was a very rural area. There weren’t very many well-educated people there. It wasn’t exposed to a lot of intellectual anything. And I don’t know, in some ways coming to Texas was a move backward even because we were right in the middle of the beginnings of the integration issue. I had gone to school in the North with black kids, not many, but there were one or two in most of the classes

¹¹ Paul E. Isaac, “Beaumont, Texas.” Handbook of Texas Online. <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/BB/hdb2.html> [accessed 2/16/2007] (also see Beaumont Race Riot 1943).

¹² Rick Koster, *Texas Music* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), viii.

that I was in. And I didn't think much of it. But we got to Beaumont and I got on the bus, you know rode the bus to school, and every street corner by the bus stands there would be black women, middle-aged black women wearing starched white outfits as maids or cooks. And they would be standing waiting for the bus and all the kids would be screaming obscenities at them out the window of the bus. It was just horrible.¹³

Tary was shocked at this open hostility and racial prejudice and felt alienated from his peers. Although Louis Owens had been raised in Texas, Tary observed that "my father didn't have an ounce of prejudice in him and neither did my mother; I just hadn't been exposed to that intolerance and hatred and hostility."¹⁴

The musical sensibilities that began to form for Tary in Illinois progressed in Beaumont. Tary listened to the local radio station and attended concerts of the numerous national and local music groups that performed in the Beaumont area. Texan J.P. Richardson, who was born in Sabine Pass in 1932, started his musical career as "The Big Bopper," a disc jockey on Beaumont's radio station KTRM.¹⁵ Tary mentioned this program in the context of his exposure to black music in Beaumont:

The Big Bopper, J.P. Richardson who at that time still hadn't recorded any songs of his own...he was the afternoon, drive-time, school-time, 4-7 PM disc jockey and he mimicked a black man. Most people knew he wasn't black, but all the music he played was "black" music...Of course, I loved it.¹⁶

During the year that Tary lived in Beaumont, he attended many touring concerts from some of the big names in rock and roll and country music who came to play at a theater there in town:

¹³ Tary Owens, interview with author, 13 September 2002.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Koster, *Texas Music*, 81.

¹⁶ Tary Owens, interview with author, 13 September 2002.

There was a show at a theater and the headliner was Gene Vincent. The other acts on there were Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Claude Perkins. But the big star at the time was Jerry Lee Lewis who had just recorded “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On,” and Johnny Cash had just done “I Walk the Line”...the rest of Johnny Cash’s show, except for that, was parodies of Elvis he was doing. And I got to see Little Richard during that same time...I went to a show [that]was integrated...during that time the only integrated rock and roll show I ever was able to go to. Black people were on one side and white people were on the other and there were fights everywhere, but not between the blacks and whites.¹⁷

While living in Beaumont in 1956, Tary met Johnny Winter and his brother Edgar who had a radio show of their own on Saturday afternoons. They were a “teenage kind of Everly Brothers band” and called themselves “Johnny and the Jammers.” Tary said that he and Johnny and another friend named Charles Homer “would get together and have arguments about blues music and rhythm and blues – what was cool and what was not cool. We took it really seriously.”¹⁸

A record store located close to Tary’s home came to be a hangout for him and, as it turned out, he recalled a part-time job:

The record store was run by an older guy who played saxophone in society bands...he hated rock and roll, but he saw that he was selling a lot of it. And I was hanging around the store every day so he let me do the ordering with the rock and roll music...I would also put together what songs were selling the best, what records were selling best and the store would give a report to the radio stations and...the radio station would have their Top 40. And I found then that I could influence the local Top 40...there was one song that nobody played, nobody bought and I loved and I just put the song on the list and it got on the charts and got played a little bit.¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

By the beginning of the next school year, the Owens Family moved to Port Arthur, seventeen miles south of Beaumont. The town, founded in 1895 by a Kansas railroad promoter, Arthur E. Stilwell, was intended to be the Gulf Coast terminus of the Kansas City, Pittsburgh, and Gulf Railroad. While that endeavor never materialized, Stillwell envisioned the importance of the town as a seaport. Because of the close proximity of Sabine Lake and the mild Gulf Coast climate, he also believed tourists could be attracted to the area. However, the primary development project was cutting a canal from the lake to deep water at Sabine Pass. The Port Arthur Channel and Dock Company finally completed that work in March 1899. By 1906, Port Arthur became an official port of entry. Two years later, the canal had been deepened and extended up the Neches River to Beaumont and Orange. The economic future of this area was secured on January 10, 1901, with the discovery of the Spindletop oilfield, just south of Beaumont:

Major oil companies—Gulf, Magnolia, Humble, Texaco—all emerged from the Spindletop oilfield boom. Gulf in 1901 and Texaco in 1902 built major refineries at Port Arthur. Pipeline tied the city to Spindletop, and petroleum products soon were shipped through the canal. By 1909 Port Arthur had become the twelfth largest port in the United States in value of exports, and by 1914 it was the second largest oil-refining point in the nation...By 1950 five refineries in the Port Arthur area employed some 12,000 workers, whose salaries accounted for 50 percent of the money spent in Port Arthur stores. Unionization of this work force was quite successful.²⁰

The Port Arthur that Tary found in 1957 was a working-class, blue-collar, union town—a town where nearly everyone's livelihood depended in one way or another on the oil refineries and petrochemical plants. As Tary observed, "Port Arthur was a rough

²⁰ John W. Storey, "Port Arthur, Texas." Handbook of Texas Online. <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/PP/hdp5.html> [accessed 2/16/2004].

town. If you went to school there, you were going to be challenged.”²¹ Part of the growing up process as an adolescent, to insulate yourself from those challenges, is to find your own circle of like-minded friends. In September 1957, Tary started school at Thomas Jefferson High School. Over the next three years Tary would cultivate a group of classmates that would, quite literally, be friends for the rest of his life. Tary’s passion for music insured that these classmates were most likely also music enthusiasts. One of those Port Arthur friends was Janis Joplin, who would become what some have called “the best white blues singer in American history” and “the greatest female singer in the history of rock ‘n’ roll.”²² Although Joplin’s meteoric rise to superstardom later separated her from many of her Texas friends, she and Tary stayed in contact until her death in 1970.

During his first year of school at Thomas Jefferson, Tary and Janis were in a social studies class together. Tary remembered that one of the topics that generated heated debate in this class was “the issue of integration and the issue of race, and Janis and I were the two ‘nigger lovers’ in the class. We started getting called that by the other kids...She and I became friends during that time; we were allies in the social studies class.”²³ By the next year, Jack Kerouac’s, *On the Road*, had been published, and Tary, Janis, and their group of friends were influenced by Kerouac’s idea of a “beat generation”:

[We] wanted to be beatniks, but were just too young. I couldn’t even grow a beard. We read books, which was verboten in Port Arthur. And we were starting to listen to jazz, because by 1958, as far as I was concerned,

²¹ Tary Owens, interview with author, 13 September 2002.

²² Richard B. Hughes, “Janis Lyn Joplin,” *The Handbook of Texas Music* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2003), 168.

²³ Tary Owens, interview with author, 13 September 2002.

rock and roll was over with. The Big Bopper, Buddy Holly, and [Richie] Valens were killed. Elvis got sent to the army where they ‘castrated’ him and it was over. The rebellion part of rock and roll ended and rock and roll was cleaned up, sanitized, and sounded like crap. So we started listening more and more to the black music. And that meant blues and jazz...I love them both equally.²⁴

One of Tary’s closest friends and mentors in school was Jim Langdon, who was a year older, graduating from Thomas Jefferson in 1959. Langdon was a trombonist in the school band and, as Tary described, “Good enough to be in all-state band two years in a row. He played in dance bands, big bands, rock and roll bands, rhythm and blues bands on weekends.” Tary had not yet learned to play any musical instrument well enough to play in public, but he considered Langdon a musical mentor, as did Janis.²⁵

Another one of Tary’s closest friends from Port Arthur was Jack Smith, now an Austin resident and principal of a middle school in Round Rock. They met the first day of high school in 1957. Jack Smith remembered some of the activities he and his friends were involved in during those high school years:

The group of us that hung out together were interested in typical high school stuff...Tary and I worked for Del Mar Pharmacy all through high school...He was really interested in music from day one. So we were down at Bono’s Record Shop after school...[My family] had a summer place...in Louisiana by Niblet’s Bluff, by one of the intakes of the Sabine River...It was about an hour’s drive...across the river at Orange...The first set of things along there were those sinful old beer joints where you lose your soul, which we became addicted to. Our first stops there were on Saturdays eating barbecue. And then as we got older, especially after high school when everybody was out at the university, that’s where a lot of those stories you’re bound to have heard took place at the Big Oaks.²⁶

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Jack Smith, interview with author, tape recording, Leander, Texas, 30 April 2004.

Tary described these trips to the music clubs, what he and his group called going “across the river”:

That’s where we all grew up in a place called The Big Oaks Club; another one called LuAnn’s; another called Buster’s; another called the Shady Grove...Buster’s had country music. Luann’s and the State Line had black R & B, rock and roll, and the Big Oaks had white bands doing rhythm and blues. And Jim Langdon was in those white big bands; also Johnny Winter—that’s when I got reacquainted with Johnny. He was in this band that was called Jerry and the Counts. And the whole thing was being able to sound black. There [would be a singer who] could sing like Bobby Bland or Ray Charles...Lots of horns...and they always opened with jazz, playing jazz. That was a musical format that I haven’t found since I left there.²⁷

Tary was not yet playing an instrument, even though he had started in the school band when he was in Grand Tower, Illinois. “I played bass, baritone horn and trumpet—brass instruments. Then, when I went to Beaumont, I played in the band there, but I hated the marching band. So I played football and basketball to get out of marching band.”²⁸ He wanted to learn guitar and took lessons from a fellow student who was a very accomplished guitarist. The guitar that Tary’s father bought was difficult to play, because Tary had to push too hard on the strings to hold them down. So that was the sum total of his guitar playing in high school.

For Tary and his group of friends, rock and roll was over by the late 1950s and they were into blues, “the rootsier, old blues—Lightnin’ Hopkins, Muddy Waters, people like that you could hear on the all night stations that played the blues.”

We were listening to Leadbelly, Odetta; you know the folk revival of the...60s was coming on. And that was when Janis learned that she could sing—by singing Leadbelly and Odetta songs at our parties...None of us

²⁷ Tary Owens, interview with author, 13 September 2002.

²⁸ Ibid.

played anything but we all sang...Janis was just influenced by...female blues singers—Big Mama [Thornton] was one of the ones, but she was probably more influenced by Bessie Smith...Her first singing was at a jazz jam session in Beaumont that we went to where Jim Langdon was playing...It was basically a band of black jazz musicians who played R&B, too, and on Sundays they got together for jam sessions...And she got up and sang two Bessie Smith songs and got a really good response.²⁹

During Tary's last year of high school, a small coffeehouse called "Sage" opened in Port Arthur. The owner, Elton Pasea, was a native of Trinidad, a merchant seaman most of his life, who had decided to make Port Arthur his home when he was not at sea. Tary, Janis, Jack Smith, and their other friends, some of whom, like Jim Langdon, were off to college already, considered this coffee house their new hang out. Pasea had jazz and classical music playing at the coffeehouse and art hanging on the walls. Tary remembered that "[Pasea] displayed two of Janis's early paintings. Janis was more of a painter than a singer at first. She was a very talented artist...Pasea made us feel at home."³⁰

After graduation from Thomas Jefferson High in 1960, Tary started college at Lamar Tech, now Lamar University, in Beaumont. He lived at home his first year, but by his second year moved into an apartment with several of his friends. Janis also enrolled at Lamar Tech, but as Tary admits, "None of us were very good students."³¹ Tary attended Lamar Tech for a total of three semesters and earned, as he remembered in retrospect, ten hours of college credit. Undecided about what his major would be, he declared himself a business major, the sort of practical course of study that was expected of many if not most of the students who graduated from high school in Port Arthur. Jack

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

Smith reflected on what was going on with their circle of friends in those first few years out of high school:

A lot of people were finding out that what they'd been told and who they'd been told they were – when you come from an area like Port Arthur the idea is that you will be in oil or something related to it. And that is not a silly notion. People were making money...And you look at all the universities that surround that area, including Lamar Tech, basically that is what it started off to do, to service that area. And it became an engineering school...Now [after high school]we were running into a group of people who read and it's not math books, and it's not engineering books, and they're maybe not exactly knowing what it is they want to do, but we've got a long list of things we know we don't want to do.³²

Included within the ten hours of college credit Tary did acquire at Lamar Tech was at least one English course that included a project related to folklore. Tary focused his project topic on music, particularly folk ballads.³³ The project captured his imagination, and he decided that English with an emphasis on folklore would be his course of study. Among his group of friends, now expanded to include young people from beyond the boundaries of Port Arthur, word began circulating about Austin's more liberal attitude toward racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity. Tary decided to head to Austin in 1962 and enroll at the University of Texas.

³² Jack Smith, interview with author, 30 April 2004.

³³ Tary Owens, interview with author, 13 September 2002.

CHAPTER III

AUSTIN AND BEYOND (1962-1980)

The times they are a changin.'

- Bob Dylan

The Austin that Tary Owens and his Port Arthur and Beaumont friends came to in 1962 was a far different town from the small, frontier outpost established in 1839 as the state capital. Mirabeau B. Lamar, second president of the three-year-old Republic of Texas, had suggested this location to the site-selection committee in January 1839. David C. Humphrey described the area: "Impressed by its beauty, healthfulness, abundant natural resources, promise as an economic hub, and central location in Texas territory, the commission purchased 7,735 acres along the Colorado River comprising the hamlet of Waterloo and adjacent lands."³⁴ The new capital "was built quickly in the wilderness, and was named after Stephen F. Austin, 'the father of Texas.' Judge Edwin Waller, who was later to become the city's first mayor, surveyed the site and laid out a street plan that has survived largely intact to this day." During October 1839, President Lamar and the government of the Republic arrived in town to occupy the newly opened state offices. By January 1840, Austin's population rose to 856 people. The new town plan included a

³⁴ David C. Humphrey, "Austin, Texas," *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/AA/hda3.html> [accessed 2/13/2006].

hilltop site for a capitol building facing south toward the Colorado River along a broad thoroughfare named Congress Avenue. Congress and Pecan Street (now 6th Street) have remained Austin's principal business streets to the present.³⁵

During the next one hundred or more years, Austin faced dramatic challenges and changes, including Texas's annexation by the United States in 1845, secession and Civil War from 1861-1865, and a Reconstruction period with Union troops occupying the city. Austin's African-American population increased dramatically during the 1860s, so much so that, by 1870, Austin's 1,615 black residents composed 36 percent of the 4,428 residents. From the 1870s to the 1880s Austin would secure its position as the political center of Texas with the completion of the new Capitol in 1888 and as an educational center with the establishment of the University of Texas in 1881. That same year Tillotson Collegiate and Normal Institute opened, providing education for African Americans. St. Edward's College soon followed receiving its charter in 1885.³⁶

Austin's population grew steadily over the next several decades, even during the harsh years of the 1930s and the Great Depression. The political skills of Mayor Tom Miller, who took office in 1933, and United States Congressman Lyndon Baines Johnson, elected in 1937, helped Austin procure badly needed federal funds from a variety of President Roosevelt's New Deal programs. Money for municipal construction projects, public housing, and dams along the Colorado River enhanced Austin's appeal as a residential city.³⁷ The diverse cultural groups attracted to Austin throughout its history, including immigrants from Europe, Africa, Mexico, and Asia "have enriched Austin's

³⁵ Biruta Celmins Kearn, "Brief History of Austin," Austin History Center, <http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/library/ahc/briefhistory.htm> [accessed 2/13/2006].

³⁶ Ibid.

civic and cultural life,” and helped create the tolerant and creative atmosphere that encouraged Owens and friends to move there in the early 1960s.³⁸ The five years that Owens first lived in Austin formed the foundation for the avocational and professional course he would follow the rest of his life.

During the early 1960s, Austin was, in many ways, still a typical college town, enhanced by the population of students from all over Texas, the United States, and the world. Life on the University of Texas campus generally revolved around course work, extracurricular activities, and for some students, a social life centered in sororities and fraternities. However, challenges to these established traditions were already fomenting in Austin when Owens arrived in 1962. It was during that summer, while he was still living in Beaumont, that Owens met John Clay and Bill Beckman, both University of Texas students. They invited him to Austin to visit them at their apartment complex near campus, known affectionately as “the Ghetto.” Owens rode to the Capitol City with a friend and visited “the Ghetto,” which would soon become his first Austin residence.

He remembered some of the people he met and the music he heard:

That weekend I heard Powell [St. John] and Lannie [Wiggins] play and was very impressed. Lannie had a Martin 017 and a banjo. He played both very well, finger picking and flat picking on the guitar. On banjo he could frail “old timey” style as well as three finger “Scruggs” style picking. He seemed to know all of Woody Guthrie’s songs as well as traditional ones like “Railroad Bill.” Also, jug band tunes like the Memphis Jug Band’s “Stealin’” and Leadbelly’s “Goin’ Up That Mississippi River.” I had never heard anyone play traditional music so well. Lannie had a huge influence on me and I vowed to learn to play like him. Later, when I bought my first guitar, I found a 017 Martin like Lannie’s for \$57. What a guitar! Powell was (and still is) an absolutely magnificent harmonica player and a wonderful singer. I remember “Sal’s Got a Wooden Leg,” “Custard Pie,” and especially “East Texas.” I also

³⁷ “Austin, Texas.” *Handbook of Texas Online*, 2-4.

³⁸ “Brief History of Austin,” p. 3.

heard more of John [Clay] and was mightily affected by “Road to Mingus” and “The Anson Runaway.” John and Powell were the first hipster songwriters [in Austin] who wrote traditional style.³⁹

Later in the summer, Owens left Beaumont and Port Arthur for good and moved to Austin. While he arrived with few college credits, his interest in folklore had been piqued by the English courses he took while at Lamar Tech. His love for the rich mix of musical genres he experienced growing up in the “Golden Triangle” of Southeast Texas also shaped his musical sensibilities:

I first got interested in folk music before I came to Austin...I was taking an English course from Dr. Frank Abernathy at Lamar Tech in Beaumont...he had been an officer in the Folklore Society and...was a folklore nut. I ended up taking my freshman English from him. We talked about folk music—collecting folk music, finding it and the people that were doing the old songs.⁴⁰

While he planned to attend the University of Texas, Owens did not enroll until 1963. He reflected on his first Austin residence:

It was at 2812 and a half Nueces Street...I moved into the Ghetto the day I got there [Austin]. The first night I slept out in a hammock, out in the yard, and then was able to share a room. There were four of us in this one apartment. The rent was \$40 a month for all of us...There were eight apartments in the Ghetto and each one had some sort of character living there. Powell St. John lived downstairs. Upstairs was myself and Wali Stopher and Kit Teal and Bill Killeen...Powell had his own place and John Clay, another real seminal singer/songwriter in Austin [lived there].⁴¹

³⁹ “Ghetto History – Tary Owens,” p. 3-4, <http://www.texasghetto.com/GhettoHistory.htm> [accessed 2/14/2006].

⁴⁰ Tary Owens, interview with author, tape recording, Austin, Texas, 2 August 2003.

⁴¹ Tary Owens, interview with author, tape recording, Austin, Texas, 2 October 2002.

Some of the characters living at the Ghetto would be significant names in the creation of the Austin music scene. One of those characters, Powell St. John, a University of Texas art major, also played harmonica. As St. John recalls:

In my second year at UT, I fell in with a group of young folks from the Unitarian Church and this was my introduction to liberal ideas, left wing politics, and folk music. Through them I came in contact with Austin's counter-culture ultimately moving into an apartment inhabited by such individuals. The Austin bard John Clay was already living there and he tipped me off to the availability of a pad at that location. This place was a building that originally was a bachelor officer's quarters, one of thousands that were thrown up on military bases during World War II and sold to veterans after the war. I affectionately dubbed it 'The Ghetto.' The name seemed appropriate since the people living there were marginalized by the dominant culture, persecuted and driven into hiding, at least that's the way it seemed to me. As news of the place spread, other like minded persons began to show up, including a large contingent from the Beaumont/Port Arthur area. This is how I came to meet Tary Owens.⁴²

St. John also remembered how he, Owens, and some of his friends from Port Arthur, including Janis Joplin and Jim Langdon, joined with them to play music:

By this time, (the summer of 1962) I was heavily involved in the folk music revival that was our generation's version of goldfish swallowing and raccoon coats. Janis Joplin was a frequent visitor to the Ghetto and she and Lannie Wiggins, a hot guitar and banjo picker, (one of my Unitarian friends), and I had worked up a set of material and were having great fun picking and singing and drinking beer every night in the back yard. Tary and Langdon were jazz fans—Langdon was an accomplished trombone player and at that time; Tary was playing trumpet. I don't think I ever heard him play that trumpet though...I don't remember when he moved to Austin...All I know at this point is that suddenly Tary was on the scene and now he was playing guitar, going with flow I guess, getting into the music that was really hip at the time and also, much more accessible than progressive jazz.⁴³

⁴² Powell St. John, e-mail interview with author, 28 May 2004.

⁴³ Ibid.

Another important Ghetto resident was John Clay, a man Owens recalled as one of the key figures in the early Austin music scene:

John played banjo and wrote outrageously long songs based on the Appalachian ballad style of singing. It's acapella a lot of times or very light accompaniment and story songs. And he wrote some incredible story songs...John is an incredible character...He was from Stamford, Texas, and...was a graduate student in linguistics. He's still alive...He's very unappreciated as a songwriter, as a performer...John had a band called the Lost Austin Band all through the 70s and 80s...the Lost Austin Band...played...once or twice a week, and made a record. [He had] five musicians behind him—fiddle, dobro, accordion, guitar, and then John on his banjo. He had the oddest banjo style of anyone I've ever heard. It was bizarre. Banjo is kind of a bizarre instrument anyway.⁴⁴

John Clay, Owens, and some other Ghetto residents participated in one important part of the Austin music scene—the Thursday night “folksings” at the University’s Student Union Building. These were open to anyone who roamed in and wanted to sing and play or just listen. Author Barry Shank, who discusses the development of 1960s Austin music in his book, *Dissonant Identities*, describes these student union gatherings:

In 1960, the University added a “folksinger” to the faculty of its English department. [Roger] Abrahams also became the faculty sponsor of a folk singing club that met at the Chuckwagon in the student union. On the college campuses of the East Coast, folk singing had become a popular pastime, as students attempted to recreate the conditions of premodern, precommercialized cultural practice. Because of the sense of active participation that came from amateur group singing, the folk songs themselves seemed to be more meaningful than popular songs on the radio.⁴⁵

Shank suggests that the students who participated in these weekly folksings were looking for ways to differentiate themselves “from the student body represented by

⁴⁴ Tary Owens, interview with author, 2 October 2002.

fraternities, sororities, and football players.” The Ghetto crowd, including Owens, Joplin, and the others “latched onto the singing of traditional folk songs as a way of actively demonstrating their difference—their ‘beatnik’ or ‘proto-hippie’ status.”⁴⁶ Owens remembered these gatherings with his friends and described the folksings as the forerunner of the folk music scene in Austin. He said the folksings were held in one of the reading rooms at the southern end of the Student Union Building, not in the Chuck Wagon as Barry Shank reported:

All sorts of people would come to the folksing. We kind of dominated it frankly, but there were lots of other people...who came in and we’d sing a couple of songs... We started the organization for traditional music—that’s what we called it; we didn’t use the word folk. We started putting on concerts in the Union, not the ballroom, the Union Theater, at the north end of the building; there was a movie theater and auditorium. It’s still there...Michael Nesmith, from San Antonio (later a member of the Monkees)...well he had a trio, a folk trio that imitated the Kingston Trio. He brought his trio up to Austin to play at the folksing. I think they were expecting to bowl everybody over; we were not Kingston Trio fans at all. As far as we were concerned that was old history. They were not well received.⁴⁷

Soon, Owens and others from the folksings, most specifically the Ghetto crowd, began to hear about another gathering of musicians and singers every Wednesday night at Kenneth Threadgill’s bar. They heard that the owner could sing like Jimmie Rodgers and had a jukebox filled with Rodgers and Hank Williams records. This sounded like their kind of bar and were determined to go see the place for themselves.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Barry Shank, *Dissonant Identities: The Rock ‘N’ Roll Scene in Austin, Texas* (Lebanon, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994) 40.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁴⁷ Tary Owens, interview with author, tape recording, Austin, Texas, 26 September 2002.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

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

In 1933, Threadgill had moved to Austin and began working at an old service station located on North Lamar Boulevard. In December of that same year, he bought the place and converted it into a tavern with a restaurant, service station, and an area where he and other performers could sing and play. With the repeal of Prohibition, Threadgill received the first beer license in Austin, and he and his wife, Mildred, continued to run the establishment, closing only for a brief time during World War II. Although Threadgill's had seating for only about forty-five, the place was usually packed on weekends when he and his band, the Hootenanny Hoots, played. Wednesday nights became the designated time "for university students and local residents to congregate for beer, country music, yodeling, and the 'Alabama Jubilee,' the song that would usually get Threadgill to dance his patented shuffle." Those Wednesday night gatherings attracted a diverse group such as "goat ropers, university Greeks, hippies, and average Joes" who could mix together and enjoy the hootenanny.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Alan Lee Haworth, "Kenneth Threadgill," *The Handbook of Texas Music* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2003), 326.

A group of graduate students from the University of Texas had discovered Threadgill's around 1959 and had become regular performers with Threadgill on those Wednesday night gatherings. As Shank writes, their love of the more traditional music and how they came together as a group preceded Owens and his group's story:

Bill Malone was writing a dissertation on the history of country music [at the University of Texas]. Stan Alexander was an English graduate student who loved traditional folk songs and ballads. Willie Benson was devoting equal attention to the study of psychology and bluegrass guitar, while Ed Mellon was playing the mandolin and idolizing Bill Monroe. These four young men had been meeting regularly in Mellon's apartment, listening to and trying to copy the recordings of traditional and bluegrass material that they had discovered in the Austin public library. Once Willie Benson heard about Threadgill's, he dragged the quartet out to the bar, where they played at least once a week, and sometimes more, for three or four years...The enthusiasm that these graduate students shared for older music endeared them immediately to the regular performers and customers of the old honky-tonk.⁵⁰

The group of friends from the Ghetto, which included Powell St. John on harmonica, Lannie Wiggins on guitar and banjo, and Janis Joplin playing auto-harp and singing with the others, called themselves the Waller Creek Boys. This group eventually migrated out to Threadgill's and took part in the Wednesday night music gatherings, as did Owens and John Clay. As Owens recalled:

Kenneth not only welcomed all of us and treated us like his children, [but] encouraged us to play. I was learning to play; I was a little bit behind the others in my musical ability. I became a member of the band at Threadgill's, called Kenneth Threadgill and the Hootenanny Hoots...Before our group showed up out there it was graduate students, UT graduate students playing bluegrass music. Bill Malone and Stan Alexander and Ed Mellon on mandolin; they were the band for a long time that backed up Kenneth [who] didn't go play outside of his own place. And they never played outside of Threadgill's...They all got their

⁵⁰ Shank, *Dissonant Identities*, p. 39-40.

[doctorates] and went on and then we became the band. The Waller Creek Boys got incorporated into Kenneth's band.⁵¹

Owens agreed that these Wednesday night performances attracted a diverse group of patrons: "The Threadgill's music scene was like a coming together of the red necks and, they weren't hippies yet, the pre-hippie hipsters, I guess. All three places were our scene—Threadgill's, the Ghetto, and the folksing."⁵² These three places helped shape Owens's music sensibilities and set him on the course of study he was about to start at the University of Texas.

Though not yet a student in 1962, Owens hung out on campus at the Chuck Wagon and attended the folksings at the student union where he met a variety of university students. One group of students included Gilbert Shelton, Tony Bell, Lieuen Adkins, and Bill Helmer who were on the staff of *The Texas Ranger*, the campus humor magazine. Owens also met his first wife, Madeleine Peppel (now Villatoro) at the Chuck Wagon before he enrolled as a student. Madeleine recounted those college days:

My mother had wanted me to be in a sorority. I was very shy and [that was] not my thing at all...I had gotten out of the sorority and there was a whole group of people that were meeting in the Chuck Wagon...that's where I first met Tary. My good friend was Tammy Dean at that time. She was a year younger than I was, but she was a very precocious young lady; she was so talented. She could write poetry and played the guitar a little bit, making up her own music and songs. I just thought she was pretty neat because she could do all those things. So this was a way to be out there in someone's company and we somehow ended up at some of the *Ranger* parties...that was the college humor magazine. And that's where there were a lot of young people who were counter-culture...They were more out there...they were outsiders in a way.⁵³

⁵¹ Tary Owens, interview with author, 26 September 2002.

⁵² Ibid.

Madeleine attended some of the folksings at the student union and knew that Owens was interested in music:

He was writing some poetry. I don't know that he was actually writing songs. He was already familiar, I guess, because of Janis's interest in Appalachian music, folk music, and ballads...that's the kind of old ballads [that]Tary would sing...I got pregnant very soon after we got to know each other [in 1963]. Our son was born in April of 1964...once we were married and he was taking the courses...we were spending all of our money on records. He was accumulating all the music—the blues. He was really getting into that; buying a lot of the blues music.⁵⁴

Owens enrolled at the University of Texas in 1963. He knew that he loved Madeleine and that the honorable thing to do was to get married and to go back to school:

[I decided] I'll go back to school and get a real job and quit this beatnik life. I never quit the beatnik life, but I did get a job at the Austin State Hospital as an attendant...that's what they called the people who took care of the mentally ill...I worked on the 11 to 7 shift at night...I worked there for three years while I enrolled, got myself back into UT. I went to summer school one summer to get my grades up...and once I got in, I went straight through for the next three years. [I] worked at the state hospital and participated in the Threadgill's band every Wednesday night and participated in the growing underground scene that grew out of the Ghetto.⁵⁵

Drugs became an important part of the counter-culture movement in Austin and other parts of America during the 1960s. Because many of them were using illegal drugs, Owens and his friends knew that the Ghetto was under surveillance and that by 1963 the fear was that the police would take action against them. Owens commented on his drug use, which he started in earnest after moving to Austin, and the situation at the Ghetto surrounding the prevalence of drugs:

⁵³ Madeleine Villatoro, interview with author, tape recording, Austin, Texas, 24 November 2003.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

We smoked pot, but it was hard to get. You had to go over to the eastside and buy it from black jazz musicians. Even best friends at the Ghetto would not tell each other that they smoked pot. Everyone was that paranoid about it. They were doing it privately, but we did start peyote there. Peyote, at the time, was legal. You could get peyote buttons at the Hudson's Cactus Farm in Leander for a nickel a bud...My first trip to Austin I took peyote. That became part of everyone's experience...And it was a very spiritual experience; it was very intense. [In Beaumont] well, we smoked grass; I had my first grass—I got it from Janis. She got it in Mexico, on a trip to Mexico. There were a lot of drugs around [Beaumont], but we weren't part of the drug scene there, except for smoking pot...Not very much pot at all. The drugs started in Austin.⁵⁶

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

We lived by the campus; it was 22nd and Pearl Street...an old stucco, two-story building that had apartments...it cost like \$50 a month. And down the hall was Tommy Hall...And next door was Gilbert Shelton, Tony Bell, and they were...doing the *Ranger* humor magazine. And, Gilbert had a piano there, and I can remember that Maria Muldar came, at one time, and played there. They had a party and she played. [We] were there until the birth of our son; we decided we needed a bigger place—on Grandview...we had friends that were moving to New York. So we just took over their place and it was a house that had an apartment on the upper level. We had the downstairs. What I remember about that was we lived right down the alley from Russell Lee, who was a photographer. He was Burton's teacher. We lived there while he [Lee] was still alive. And I can remember...knowing that he was down there, that we were living near a celebrity.⁵⁷

Once Owens enrolled at The University of Texas, his interest in folk music led him to register for classes in folklore taught within the English department by Dr.

⁵⁵ Tary Owens, interview with author, 26 September 2002.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Américo Paredes and Dr. Roger Abrahams. The University already had a strong tradition of folklore scholarship established by faculty members, including the celebrated folklorists J. Frank Dobie and John Henry Faulk.⁵⁸ The fact that Paredes and Abrahams were also recorded folk musicians impressed Owens. Abrahams had a 1961 recording on the Prestige label and Paredes had recorded during the 1950s.⁵⁹

The first folklore class Owens took was an introductory course taught, as he remembered, by Paredes, who asked the students as their first assignment to find a selection of folklore, to bring it to class for discussion, and to write a paper about its history. Owens used material he had found for his class with Dr. Frank Abernathy at Lamar Tech:

That was the first folklore...I had collected. I'd listened to an East Texas man singing, "Black-Jack David,"...which is one of the oldest ballads going back to England and France. It used to be the "Raggle, Taggey Gypsies, Oh," and "Gypsy Davey" and lots of different variances...the East Texas version of it was "Black-Jack David." [This song] is...very well documented,...very popular in England and Ireland.⁶⁰

Paredes was quite taken with the song and impressed by Owens's writing and interest in the whole process of folklore – collecting the music, stories, talking styles and customs passed along among a people. Owens found Paredes to be a superb teacher and mentor, with his own fascinating story, someone who had been a folklore "subject" before he became a scholar and educator.⁶¹

Born in Brownsville, Texas, in 1915, Américo Paredes experienced first hand the border tensions and violence that followed the 1910 Mexican Revolution, as well as the

⁵⁷ Villatoro, interview with author, 24 November 2003.

⁵⁸ Tary Owens, interview with author, 2 October 2002.

⁵⁹ Tary Owens, interview with author, 26 September 2002.

⁶⁰ Tary Owens, interview with author, 2 October 2002.

ethnic bias and discrimination aimed at Mexican Americans. He attended public schools, worked a variety of jobs to help support his family, and during summer vacations often took ranch jobs and “listened to corridos, folk tales, and oral traditions recounted by border ‘Mexicanos’ around the campfire,” influences he would eventually incorporate into his own poetry and prose. Along the way he also learned to play guitar and sing. After high school graduation in 1934, Paredes enrolled at Brownsville Junior College, worked for the *Brownsville Herald* as a staff writer, and submitted his poetry to *La Prensa*, a San Antonio newspaper. His first book of poetry, *Cantos de adolescencia*, was published in 1936. Paredes continued employment with the *Herald* and worked for Pan American Airways prior to his enlistment as a U. S. Army infantryman in 1944.⁶²

During the 1940s, Paredes met Texas folklorist and author William A. Owens, who was traveling throughout the state collecting regional folksongs as part of his job with the Extension Division of the University of Texas. Owens recorded Paredes singing some of the songs of the Texas-Mexico border region. The songs and stories Owens gathered on this trip eventually became his University of Iowa doctoral dissertation, published in 1950 as *Texas Folksongs*, by the University Press in Dallas.⁶³

This meeting with Owens piqued Paredes’s interest in learning more about the ballads and folklore of the Mexican border. After his discharge from the service and several years working for the Red Cross overseas, Paredes enrolled at the University of Texas intent on fulfilling his dream of becoming a professor of English. He completed his undergraduate degree in one year, his M.A. in English and folklore within two years,

⁶¹ Tary Owens, interview with author, 2 August 2003.

⁶² Matt Meier, “Américo Paredes,” <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/benson/paredes/biography.html> [accessed 3/22/2007].

and by 1956 received his doctorate. After one year teaching at Texas Western College in El Paso, Paredes returned to Austin and accepted a tenure-track professorship at the University of Texas teaching folklore and creative writing. His doctoral dissertation on the Tejano border hero, Gregorio Cortez, was published in 1958. Titled *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and its Hero*, the book “was an immediate and outstanding success and brought him widespread recognition and peer respect.” *Folktales of Mexico*, published in 1970, and his 1976 work, *A Texas Mexican Cancionero: Folksongs of the Lower Border*, would solidify his scholarly reputation.⁶⁴

By the time Owens enrolled at the University, Paredes was established within the Department of English as the up-and-coming folklore expert. He had become, as Owens observed, “the spokesman for Mexican culture” at the University. Paredes got involved, “not only defending Mexican culture, but telling it like it is about the border skirmishes and the border conflict–culture conflicts.” He challenged the scholarship of longtime, venerable professors Walter Prescott Webb and J. Frank Dobie who told the story of the American Southwest from the Anglo perspective. Owens continued: “Paredes was giving the other side of the story. It says something about all three men–Paredes, Webb, and Dobie–that they were able to disagree in their writing but get along socially... They were able to accommodate each other and all three lived out and finished their careers at UT.”⁶⁵

Within a short time after Owens began his course work in folklore, Paredes and Abrahams informed him about a grant from the Lomax Foundation that was available to

⁶³ “William A. Owens,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/OO/fow11_print.html [accessed 3/21/2007].

⁶⁴ Meier, p. 2.

⁶⁵ Tary Owens, interview with author, 2 August, 2003.

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

During the 1930s, John Lomax, with his son Alan as his assistant, traveled throughout the South and Southwest making field recordings of local musicians. Their travels included trips into prisons to record the spirituals and work songs of the black inmates. While not the first folklorists to use the recording machine, as author Benjamin Filene points out, "The Lomaxes employed superior technology, recorded far more widely, and embraced the recording medium with more passion than previous collectors." The Lomaxes are credited with "discovering" Huddie Ledbetter (Leadbelly) at the Angola prison farm in Louisiana and, after his release in 1934, with promoting Leadbelly's career and helping preserve his music. However, some scholars, including Benjamin Filene, point to the limits of this relationship for Leadbelly:

[The Lomaxes] realized that if they wanted Lead Belly to achieve mainstream popularity his very incompatibility with mainstream society was his greatest asset. This realization led the Lomaxes to manipulate not only Lead Belly's image but also his music...[his] commercial strength depended on the perception that his songs were "pure folk." But...audiences would not necessarily appreciate [Leadbelly's] style unadulterated. So...the Lomaxes encouraged him to make his singing more accessible to urban [white] audiences. ⁶⁶

The manipulation of Leadbelly's music and appearance also included John Lomax exercising firm control over the revenues Leadbelly received for concert appearances and recordings, which led to tensions between the two men. Despite these problems, Filene describes John and Alan Lomax as "the most spectacularly successful and innovative folk song—collecting team of the twentieth century."⁶⁷ Their lifelong dedication to preserving the wide variety of American folk music is reflected in archived Lomax collections, housed at numerous institutions, including the Archive of Folksong at the Library of Congress.⁶⁸

Once Owens expressed his interest in the Lomax grant, Abrahams and Paredes assisted him in the application process. The foundation's goal in awarding these grants was to fund the gathering of field recordings similar to those done in the 1930s. How had folk music evolved over the last thirty years since the Lomaxes had done their study? Although the grants were usually given to graduate students and Owens was still an undergraduate, he discovered that the University had no graduate students pursuing a major in folklore studies. The foundation ultimately awarded Owens a stipend of \$500 to pursue his topic, "The Folk Music of Central Texas." He purchased a \$150 professional quality microphone and spent the remainder on a reel-to-reel tape recorder. As Owens continued course work toward a degree in English and anthropology, he also traveled around the state to record the folk musicians he found.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & Roots Music* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 55, 65.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 49, 62.

⁶⁸ "John Lomax and Alan Lomax," *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/LL/flo7.html> [accessed 3/21/2007].

⁶⁹ Tary Owens, interview with author, tape recording, Austin, Texas, 30 July 2002.

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

Some of the prisoners that [the Lomaxes] recorded didn't get out. One in particular was there thirty years later and I recorded him. He was seventy some years old, ...just a minor criminal, minor burglary, but for some reason they just kept him in prison, and I don't know why because he wasn't a violent man...And...Tippen is on those first recordings and he's one of the major people that I recorded thirty years later.⁷⁰

Owens recorded a variety of traditional worksongs and spirituals sung by the inmates at the Huntsville prison units including oral narratives called "toasts," a topic that Owens's mentor Roger Abrahams knew well.

Abrahams's University of Pennsylvania doctoral dissertation, *Deep Down in the Jungle: Black American Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia*, contained a collection and commentary on these African-American folk tales:

The toast is a narrative poem that is recited often in a theatrical manner...Toasts are often long, lasting anywhere from two to ten minutes. They conform to a general but by no means binding framing pattern. This consists of some sort of picturesque or exciting introduction, action alternating with dialogue (because the action is usually a struggle between two people or animals), and a twist ending of some sort, either a quip, an ironic comment, or a brag...Toasts are not sung, and it is perhaps the lack of reliance on the structure of a tune that allows their freedom of form.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Roger D. Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1970) 97-98.

Owens recorded many such poems during his sessions with Texas prisoners, including one toast, “Signifying Monkey,” which Abrahams analyzed in his book.

While at the Texas prison units, Owens also recorded the songs of Mexican-American inmates, some instrumental tunes and others sung in Spanish, as well as Anglo-American folk songs, such as “Froggie Went a Courtin” and “Comin’ Round the Mountain.” In some cases the inmates sang acapella, although they also had guitars, a variety of rhythm instruments, and even snare drums and accordions. During the two days Owens spent at the Texas prison units, he recorded approximately one hundred selections of songs, along with other material, the bulk of which documented the music of the black inmates.⁷²

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

Burnet, Texas, was hosting the world’s champion old-time fiddling contest. I recorded that whole event. The players are now all legends. The Franklin Family were a family of fiddlers and they were all champions at one time or another. Louis Franklin was the current champion then in ‘63 or ‘64 when I recorded him...and the twelve year old son had entered the contest and he is now the number one fiddle player in Nashville.⁷³

⁷² Tary Owens, archived field recordings list, part of personal archives at Owens’s home.

When Owens started attending the gatherings at Threadgills, he met Bill Neely, a country blues guitarist who moved to Austin in 1949, became friends with Kenneth Threadgill, and began playing at the bar regularly. Their mutual admiration for Jimmie Rodgers and the influence he had on their music no doubt solidified the friendship. Owens included Bill Neely in the field study, recording Neely with Powell St. John on backup harmonica and John Moyer playing bass. Owens described Neely as one of Austin's first singer/songwriters and the first to write about drug addiction. While Neely did not drink, smoke, or do drugs, he wrote songs about the hard life he had seen growing up during the Depression years and the down-and-out life he had witnessed. Included in his repertoire were standard blues numbers of such black performers as Blind Lemon Jefferson, cowboy ballads, and popular tunes of the day. Owens admired Neely's authenticity and his abilities on acoustic guitar. "Bill was one of my guitar teachers, one of my mentors. And I played with him for years in the Threadgill band."⁷⁴

Although the field research accomplished with the Lomax grant included a variety of Texas musical genres, Owens focused predominantly on black blues artists who today would be called "roots" musicians. Owens followed in the recording footsteps of the Lomaxes to some degree, but also made a few important discoveries of "new" talent. Teodar Jackson (pronounced Teole), a black blues fiddler from the St. John's district in Austin, was one such performer, as were fiddlers Tommy Wright from Luling and Oscar Nelson from Cameron, accompanied on guitar by his brother Newton. These were important discoveries for music history, as Owens relates:

⁷³ Tary Owens, interview with author, 2 October 2002.

⁷⁴ Tary Owens, interview with author, tape recording, Austin, Texas, 16 January 2003.

[These players] were...key to the fact that blues [music] was probably first played in Texas on fiddle and the first musicians, the first black musicians, that played for dances and things were fiddlers. Lightnin' Hopkins's...father was a fiddle player. The fiddle tradition was dying off. The last three people that I know of that played, black people that played the fiddle, except for Gatemouth Brown who's always played it, were Tommy Wright, who I recorded, and Teodar, and the Nelson Brothers.⁷⁵

Although he played guitar, Mance Lipscomb, born in Navasota, Texas, in 1895, came from a musical family, including a father who played fiddle. Young Mance received a guitar from his mother when he was eleven and began accompanying his father at dances and Saturday night socials. While Lipscomb had contact with a variety of other country musicians who were well-known across the state and nation, Lipscomb "did not make recordings until his 'discovery' by whites during the folksong revival of the 1960s." Two blues researchers, Chris Strachwitz and Mack McCormick, recorded Lipscomb on Strachwitz's Arhoolie Records label.⁷⁶ Owens included Lipscomb as part of his field study, recording him in Navasota, August 1963, and several other sessions in 1965, sometimes pairing him with other musicians, including Teodar Jackson on fiddle.⁷⁷

Two other Texas musicians recorded by Owens in the 1960s were barrelhouse piano players Robert Shaw and Roosevelt T. Williams, also known as the Grey Ghost. Both men were significant black blues artists and were important to the study of music history. The barrelhouse style uses a heavy, hard-hitting touch, a fast release, and is named for the places where the sound developed. Makeshift bars were created from sheds where beer and whiskey barrels lined the walls, an open floor provided dance space, and a piano sat on a raised platform in a corner. Both Shaw and Williams were

⁷⁵ Tary Owens, interview with author, 2 October 2002.

⁷⁶ John Minton, "Mance Lipscomb," *The Handbook of Texas Music* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2003), 185-186.

self-taught piano players, who played in a variety of bars throughout Texas, eventually making Austin home. Mack McCormick produced one Shaw album, *Texas Barrelhouse Piano*, in 1963 on the Almanac Book and Recording Company label.⁷⁸ The Grey Ghost had no commercial records, but he had been included in the field recordings completed by William A. Owens in the 1940s.⁷⁹

Other music in Tary Owens's field work included the Freddie King band and jazz recordings completed in October 1965 at the Austin venue, Charlie's Playhouse. Owens traveled to San Antonio in March 1966 to record Blues Wallace, billed as a one man band. At the Andrus Studios in Houston, Owens recorded several of his musician/songwriter friends from Austin performing original material, including Bob Brown, Ed Guinn, Powell St. John, Wali Stopher, Minor Wilson, and Gary White. While most of the recordings were completed in Texas, Owens did travel to New Orleans to interview and document the music of Babe Stovall, a dobro player, a lead Owens got while recording in Texas prisons. One other unusual recording in the field collection is an interview Owens conducted in Houston, during the summer of 1965, with his maternal grandfather, John Holly Kelly. The interview concerned Kelly's recollections of his days as a band drummer on a Mississippi riverboat during the early 1900s. Owens did conduct oral interviews with all the musicians he recorded and included those with his other field study materials.⁸⁰

In addition to making many field recordings, Owens had produced concerts at the Student Union Building when he first enrolled at the University of Texas. Owens's

⁷⁷ Tary Owens, archived field recordings list, Owens's home.

⁷⁸ Teresa Paloma Acosta, "Robert Shaw," *The Handbook of Texas Music* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2003), 287-288.

⁷⁹ Tary Owens, interview with author, 30 July 2002.

interviews and recording sessions brought him into contact with new groups of musicians, many living right in Austin. Madeleine Villatoro remembered those events:

[Tary] was always out to the clubs and...I was a stay at home, you have to stay home when you have a child anyway. But I think he was always cultivating his music—finding the people and knowing what was going on in the music scene. Tary was bringing musicians to come and play in Austin at that time too. He actually organized a blues [festival]; he got the musicians he'd found in East Austin to play at the campus.⁸¹

The first show included musicians Mance Lipscomb, Robert Shaw, and Teodar Jackson. Lipscomb and Shaw were known performers, but for Jackson, this was his first time to play before a white audience.⁸²

In addition to working toward his degree and pursuing field work for the grant, Owens took a job during his junior and senior years running the recently launched University Folklore and Oral History Archives, as Owens related:

[The University of Texas] sent me up to [Indiana University] to study their folklore archives, how to run a folklore archive...[and the University of Texas] they hired me to be the archivist...[This was] really an honor because I was an undergraduate and here I had...an office in Parnam Hall and a secretary and a phone. And I was in charge of the folklore archives for twenty hours a week while I was finishing my degree.⁸³

With an assistant to help him, Owens set about cataloguing collections from Paredes, as well as other folklore materials. While he did manage to catalog part of his own field recordings before he graduated in 1967, Owens discovered several years later

⁸⁰ Tary Owens, archived field recordings list, Owens's home.

⁸¹ Villatoro, interview with author, 24 November, 2003.

⁸² Tary Owens, interview with author, 2 October, 2002.

⁸³ Tary Owens, interview with author, 26 September and 30 July 2002.

that some of his material was not archived properly, particularly the oral interviews. He had made backup copies, however, that he retained as part of his personal collection.⁸⁴

After completing his undergraduate coursework in English and anthropology, Owens chose not to enroll in graduate school. He enjoyed the folklore work but wanted to see what he could do with his own music career. Owens had organized a five-member band he called the Southern Flyers, which included singer Angela Strehli, two guitarists, a drummer, and Owens singing and playing bass. When Owens suggested that the band make a move to California to pursue “fame and fortune,” three of the members, including Strehli, agreed. In the summer of 1967, the Owenses headed west in a new car they had purchased, pulling a small trailer packed with all they owned. Although the Owenses had no idea where they would stay, they did have a few friends from Austin already in San Francisco. Minor Wilson and his wife Mary Ann had a flat on Beaver Street and, of course, Janis Joplin, whom they had visited for a few weeks during the previous summer, lived in the area called Haight-Ashbury, a focal point for the growing hippie counter-culture movement.⁸⁵ Leaders of this movement had already declared that 1967 would be the “Summer of Love” in San Francisco. Indeed thousands of people from all over the world converged on the city during that summer for music festivals, speeches, anti-war rallies, poetry readings, and human be-ins. The events that took place in San Francisco that summer would epitomize the spirit of the counter-culture movement and serve as one of the emblematic high points of the 1960s.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Ibid., 26 September 2002.

⁸⁵ Villatoro, interview with author, 24 November 2003.

⁸⁶ Kathleen Johnson, “The Cold War Museum—Summer of Love and Woodstock,” <http://www.coldwar.org/articles/60s/summeroflove.html> [accessed 4/18/2007].

Another Austin couple known to the Owenses was living in Gualala, a coastal town north of San Francisco. They too had a small child, so Madeleine and Willie stayed with them through the summer while Tary remained in San Francisco with Minor and his wife and worked to find paying jobs for the Southern Flyers. By summer's end, Madeleine and Willie came back to San Francisco and moved into the flat on Beaver Street. There were several other folks living there by then, including their Austin friend Powell St. John. Eventually the Wilson's moved out and the Owenses took over the lease. Ultimately the house became home to many of their friends and a sort of "way station" for the comings and goings of many young people who migrated to San Francisco. Madeleine remembered those days:

So I guess that period of time was just a struggle to figure out how we were going to make money...Tary was wanting to make it doing music, but how you make that happen is a whole other point...So it was just trying to keep the musicians together to actually get your performance out there [but] it wasn't really generating any money...I got a part time job and found someone who was also in the music scene; we formed our own little co-op—a babysitting thing...Just making ends meet was what it was about for us then...we were learning about...communal living, because we shared houses or flats...there were so many people coming and going it was like a continual party...the kitchen was in continual operation, 24 hours a day...people would be sitting in the kitchen...chatting, drinking their coffee, and smoking a little weed.⁸⁷

The Southern Flyers dissolved a few months after moving to California. Some of the band members returned to Texas, but the Owenses would remain in San Francisco for nearly eight years while Owens continued to pursue a music career. He organized another group, the Pure Funk Rock Band, which included Peter Auschlin on drums and

⁸⁷ Villatoro, interview with author, 24 November 2003.

guitarists Jamie Howell and Stan Portyes.⁸⁸ The growing pop music scene in San Francisco drew many Texas musicians to the area. Owens “worked behind the scenes” with fellow Texans, including Boz Scaggs, Doug Sahm, and Mother Earth with Tracy Nelson.⁸⁹

The dynamic music scene in and around San Francisco during the 1960s owed much to the creative vision and talent of producer and promoter, Chet Helms, who was a friend of the Owenses. Helms was born in Santa Maria, California, in 1942, but when he was nine years old moved to Texas with his mother and two brothers after the death of their father. Helms attended the University of Texas, but dropped out in 1962 and moved back to California, settling in San Francisco. Drawing on the local music scene, Helms put together informal jam sessions, from which the band Big Brother and the Holding Company evolved. In 1963, Helms made a brief trip back to Austin and persuaded his college friend Janis Joplin to come out to San Francisco. He promised her that he would help promote her music career, later adding her to the Big Brother band as lead singer. Owens knew Helms in Austin through their mutual friendship with Joplin.⁹⁰

Helms also owned the Avalon Ballroom, located in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood, a performance venue that hosted many of the bands that became big during the 1960s, including the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, Country Joe & the Fish, and Big Brother and the Holding Company.⁹¹ Knowing Helms made it possible for the Owenses to get into many music events for free, which helped a young couple with

⁸⁸ Burton Wilson, with Jack Ortman, *The Austin Music Scene: Through the Lens of Burton Wilson, 1965-1994* (Austin: Eakin Press, 2001), 23.

⁸⁹ Rob Patterson, e-mail to Tary Owens, 21 June 2002.

⁹⁰ Robert Altman, “Chet Helms Bio,” http://www.altmanphoto.com/chet_helms/photo_credit_helms_bio.html [accessed 7/15/2007].

⁹¹ Aidin Vaziri and Jim Herron Zamora, “Chet Helms—Legendary S.F. Rock Music Producer,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 26 June 2005, A 21.

little money. The communal living situation at the house on Beaver Street eventually came to an end in 1969 when a fire and explosion put all the residents out on the street.

Madeleine recounted the experience and subsequent move to another residence:

I remember someone knocking on the door and saying wake up the house is on fire and we all just piled out and went across the street...the firemen came and we heard an explosion and the whole backside of the house blew off...of course we didn't have a place to live anymore...Tary wasn't there either that night. He was over in Berkeley. I don't know if he was playing music or seeing music, but he wasn't there. Or he may have gone to Texas for all I know...I remember we got moved to this other place [on 23rd Street] and of course he didn't know.⁹²

Shortly after the move to 23rd Street, Madeleine became physically rundown and was eventually diagnosed with pneumonia. The doctor suggested at least three months of bed rest, which she accomplished with the help of a friend who took care of Willie. Tary did the cooking for Madeleine during this time and generally helped out during her recovery. Madeleine came to realize, however, that their life style and marriage were not working for her:

That was kind of like the turning point for me as far as the whole drug scene. I think I realized that this was over for me. [If Tary] had other girlfriends, he never let me in on that. He never mistreated me, it was just the free love time. I think you can't maintain a relationship unless you work those things out. And I think by that time the alcohol was an issue, but I never knew that it was. And as far as the drug thing—we never thought of it as being addicted...the heroin I knew to stay away from, but I think Tary, because he was around so many people, he just succumbed to it. And I think that was really the thing that caused our marriage to break up.⁹³

⁹² Villatoro, interview with author, 24 November 2003.

⁹³ Ibid.

At that time she was not aware of how serious her husband's addictions to alcohol and drugs had become. Owens was himself in denial. By 1969, Madeleine had fallen in love with another man, which she believes was in some respects a way to get out of a situation she did not know how to control. Ultimately, Madeleine got a divorce from Tary in absentia because he had gone to Texas and could not be located for the papers to be served.⁹⁴

Hanging around with Janis Joplin and her friends, Owens started snorting heroin and later injecting the drug. Ironically, Joplin tried to steer her friend away from using heroin, but Owens was already on his way to an addiction he could not control. Owens remembered that the last time he saw Joplin alive was in the summer of 1970 at a party at her house in San Francisco:

Kris Kristofferson was there. It was right before our high school reunion in Port Arthur, and Janis offered to pay my way to go with her. But I was strung out, afraid to go. I knew Janis could buy her way out of any trouble down there, but I couldn't. I don't think I ever saw her again after that, though we did talk on the phone many more times.⁹⁵

Owens could not remember exactly where he was on October 4, 1970, the day Joplin died from a drug overdose, nor did her death scare him into getting clean. "I was so into my downward thing that I didn't feel a lot of pain about it. By that time, I was feeling so hopeless that there was no jolt that could stop me."⁹⁶

Sometime after Joplin's death, Owens came back to Austin for a while, bunking with friends who gave him places to stay. In 1971, he made a trip to Navasota in East

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Brad Buchholz, "Tary's Tale," *Austin American-Statesman*, 26 March 2000, <http://www.maryannprice.com/tale.html> [accessed 5/20/2006].

⁹⁶ Ibid.

Texas to visit his friend, bluesman Mance Lipscomb. In need of money and high on drugs, Owens stole a guitar given to Lipscomb by the Gibson Company. The theft landed Owens in jail for seven weeks in the East Texas town of Anderson, where he was forced to kick the heroin habit “cold turkey.” Owens does remember the horror of that time, filled with hallucinations and seizures, and believes it a miracle that he did not die from that experience. Clean and sober for a brief time after his release from jail, Owens headed to Houston to look for work and get back into the music scene.⁹⁷

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

Townes [Van Zandt], it was kind of his home away from home. It was run by Rex Bell...and actually Rex has a new version of the Old Quarter down in Galveston now...just about any weekend night you would hear Guy Clark or Townes or any of the people that are now up and coming, the followers of Townes and Guy. And I played there pretty regularly, as well. We had some times going up on the roof of the place. There were a lot of drugs then.⁹⁸

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

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Tary Owens, interview with author, 2 October 2002.

[The doctors] had knocked out his front tooth to get a breathing tube down him...he did everything he could to die before he was twenty-nine. He didn't think he had the right to live longer than Hank Williams...a few years later he put out what I think is his best album, for Tomato Records; it was a double, "The Late Great Townes Van Zandt." [That] was 15 years before he died.⁹⁹

Owens was closer friends with Guy Clark during those Houston days. Clark and Owens's friend, Minor Wilson, owned a guitar repair shop in Houston during the 1970s. Although born in West Texas, Clark had based himself in Houston for a while and played regularly at a club called Jesters, located on Westheimer. Owens recalled the music scene during those days:

[Jesters] that's where I played my first gig in Houston, opening for John Denver when he was first getting started. He'd just left the Chad Mitchell Trio and was just going out on his own. He'd just changed his name from Dusseldorf to Denver...there was that whole folk scene in Texas—Michael Murphy, Segle Fry—they had a band called the Dallas Jug Band. It was one of the first folk groups in Texas...there was the Cellar in Fort Worth,...it was a place to play for all of us. My first paid gig [had been] at the Cellar in San Antonio in 1962.¹⁰⁰

By the fall of 1972, Owens was back in Austin. One of the jobs he took during this time was staging rock and roll concerts to publicize George McGovern's campaign for the Presidency. Although he admitted that drug use hindered his ability to recall the details of that period, Owens believed that he met Bill Clinton, who worked on McGovern's campaign in Texas, and that Clinton probably hired Owens to produce those concerts.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Bucholtz, "Tary's Tale," 26 March 2000.

Over the next several years, Owens moved around the country, living back in California for a while, part of the time in San Francisco and then in Lake Tahoe, California, where he worked as a bartender for the Hyatt Hotel. He organized a band while there called the TK Owens Blues Band, but he remembered that he mainly made his living bartending:

My first bartending job was at Lake Tahoe. My girlfriend in San Francisco was a blues guitarist herself, named Debbie Olcesi, a Sicilian name. She had a band named Ascension, all women...she and I were engaged to get married...and she had an uncle that was the beverage manager for the Hyatt Hotel system...She came to Texas with me when I came back in 1976, but she didn't stay. [The engagement ended.] I had a serious drug problem that got in the way of everything.¹⁰²

Owens moved to Denton, Texas, where he lived for about three years from 1976 until 1979, working at Timatao's, a Mexican restaurant owned by his brothers Ben and Tim Owens. Tary organized a band called Living Proof, which provided some income, and he also played at a several clubs in Fort Worth, including the Bluebird Lounge, owned by Texas blues legend Robert Ealey. Owens would occasionally sit in with a Fort Worth band, the Juke Jumpers, headed by Sumter Bruton, guitarist Steve Bruton's older brother.¹⁰³

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

¹⁰² Tary Owens, interview with author, 16 January 2003.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

[I told him] if you're looking for a change of environment in order to stay straight, this is the last place on earth you should come... Tary already had a drug history—a significant one. All those friends in San Francisco... [Tary] was absolutely... on the bottom of their list because he had stolen things from people... I had no personal experience with any of that, but I had heard from friends that I trusted and believed that indeed he had done all of these things. I found it hard to believe, but I knew they weren't lying about it... [I decided that] I'd give him a chance.¹⁰⁴

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

[Malone] was putting on some kind of program at Tulane, doing some kind of folk talk and singing and hired Tary to play with him. So I thought that was terrific that he had already found a connection there and was actually going to pick up a few bucks. So it made me think it was going to go alright. Then one night, I think it was the night after the concert, he didn't come home. And we didn't see him for two or three days... [Tary] fell off the wagon big time.¹⁰⁵

A very angry Langdon demanded that Owens move out after they caught him trying to steal the roommate's wallet. "I guess that's the closest I ever came to killing anybody in my life," Langdon recalled, and added that "I didn't have any contact with Tary for years after that incident." Owens lived in New Orleans for another year, supporting himself by playing in a band called the Radiators. Judy Ryan, a girl friend from his Denton days,

¹⁰⁴ Jim Langdon, interview by author, tape recording, Houston, Texas, 12 December 2003.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

came and lived with Owens in New Orleans during part of that year, but by 1980 Owens made the decision to go back to Texas.¹⁰⁶

The nearly twenty years of drug and alcohol abuse had taken their toll on Owens's health, both physical and mental, and clearly on his personal relationships. Owens could no longer deny that he had a problem he could not control. He reflected on that time in his life: "There was a long time that I didn't care if I lived or died. I think I would have even welcomed death. It meant the end, the end of pain. But something finally came to me—that I didn't want to die like that. I didn't want to drown in a dumpster."¹⁰⁷ So Owens set about seeking professional help to get clean and sober and to save himself from himself.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Buchholz, "Tary's Tale," 26 March 2000.

CHAPTER IV

BACK TO TEXAS (1980-2003)

*He stands erect by bending over the fallen. He rises by lifting others.
- Robert G. Ingersoll*

By the time Owens returned to Texas in the early 1980s, he had decided that he had to seek professional help in order to end his addictions to alcohol and drugs. Owens began treatment for addiction at the state hospital in Wichita Falls before returning to Austin in 1982, where he continued to recover. For Owens, part of his efforts to stay clean and sober would involve working as a drug and alcohol counselor after he earned his LCDC, licensed chemical dependency counselor, at Austin Community College. Although Austin already had several Alcoholics Anonymous groups, it had no Narcotics Anonymous organizations, so Owens helped form the first such group.¹⁰⁸

Over the next several years, Owens also pursued certification as an HIV counselor. He was a founding member of the A.I.D.S. Committee for the National Association of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Counselors and chaired the A.I.D.S. Task Force for the Texas Association of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Counselors from 1989-1991. As chairman of the Texas task force, Owens worked to develop a standard HIV curriculum for chemical dependency counselors in the state. He traveled throughout Texas and the

nation giving presentations at professional conferences and for health-related organizations, including the Center for Disease Control, the Betty Ford Center, the Texas Department of Health, and the Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse. In 1988, Owens took a position as Outreach Supervisor for C.A.R.E., a community based agency that provided HIV prevention, education, and drug and alcohol counseling to high-risk populations within Travis County. As a recovering alcoholic and drug abuser himself, Owens could speak from personal experience as he worked with addicts at public and private treatment centers, jails, and other agencies.¹⁰⁹

The various counseling jobs Owens took provided a steady income and continued reinforcement for his own sobriety. His brother Tim reflected on what Tary's recovery meant to the Owens Family and to Tary's friends:

[After] Tary got into the right program...[he] never really got back into the despair of being a junkie...When he got his one year pin, he came to Houston and gave it to my Dad. And...that's when my Dad stopped drinking. If Tary can do it, Dad said he'd do it, too...[and Tary] went back and apologized to everybody. He re-established contact through the 12-step program. He wasn't ever able to make financial restitution. Most of the cost was on himself. He hurt himself more than he hurt anyone else. Do what you can. Not everyone is going to forgive you, but in most cases people did forgive Tary.¹¹⁰

Owens knew that drinking and drugs had hindered his success in the music business. He marked his sobriety as beginning in 1983 and he said, I "started my life again and I didn't think about the music or the recordings I'd made."¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Tary Owens, interview with author, 16 January 2003.

¹⁰⁹ Tary Owens, personal archives from Owens's home, résumé.

¹¹⁰ Tim Owens, interview with author, 13 December 2003.

¹¹¹ Tary Owens, interview with author, 30 July 2002.

That would change in 1986 when Owens roamed into the Barker Texas History Center, now known as the Center for American History on the University of Texas campus. He toured an exhibit called, "From Lemon to Lightnin': Texas Blues," which featured several of the recordings Owens had made in the 1960s, including those of barrelhouse piano player Roosevelt T. Williams, also known as the Grey Ghost.¹¹²

Born in Bastrop, Texas, on December 7, 1903, Williams spent his youth in Taylor, which was a major cotton and rail center during the early 1900s. As a young man, Williams attended school and worked in the cotton fields by day and at night was drawn to the music he heard coming from the local juke joints, which, at the time, he was too young to enter. Williams absorbed a variety of musical influences and spent many hours at the home of a friend who owned a piano, "picking out melodies he'd heard, teaching himself everything he'd ever need to know. The melting pot of African-American, Mexican, Anglo, German, Czech, and French traditions contributed to the unique musical style which he would later call his own."¹¹³

From the 1920s to the 1940s, Williams lived a nomadic life-style, riding freight trains around Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and New Mexico. He followed the cotton harvests, entertaining black migrant workers and performing at house parties, medicine shows, carnivals, juke joints, and barrelhouses. Because his playing style reflected the influence of jazz greats such as Charlie Dillard, Earl "Fatha" Hines, and Count Basie, some people referred to Williams as the "Thelonius Monk of blues players." However, his habit of appearing, as if from nowhere, to play an engagement and then disappearing just as suddenly, eventually would earn Williams the permanent nickname "Grey Ghost."

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ "Grey Ghost," <http://sixfingeredman.net/old/writing/bje.html> [accessed 8/18/2007].

By the late 1940s, Williams had settled in Austin, taking a job as a bus driver for the Austin ISD, which he held until his retirement in 1965. During those years, he continued to play at local clubs, such as Fat Green's and the legendary Victory Grill, a "showplace for blues players" in East Austin.¹¹⁴

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

Mr. Shaw was really gracious to me, and he was my first source of musicians to go to when I first started...he gave me several names of piano players and guitar players and other musicians...[He] gave me an introduction into that whole community...He also led me to Lavada Durst, [who] recorded gospel songs and had written one big gospel music hit in the 50s called, "Let's Talk About Jesus," that was a million seller in the gospel field. And [Shaw] gave me...names of other musicians...like Boot Walden, Baby Dotson who were piano players who'd passed on. And he said, now...there's Grey Ghost [and] he gave me Ghost's address...Grey Ghost was a real exciting find for me because he had a huge repertoire.¹¹⁵

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

There was another folklorist in between the Lomaxes and me...[In the 1940s, William A. Owens] recorded this itinerant piano player, the Grey Ghost, and then I recorded him again in 1965...at this exhibit they had one

¹¹⁴ Dave Hooper. "End of the Line: The Passing of Grey Ghost," http://www.austinchronicle.com/issues/vol_15/issue_47/music.greyghost.html [accessed 4/9/2007].

¹¹⁵ Tary Owens, interview with author, tape recording, Austin, Texas, 13 March 2003.

whole display of the Grey Ghost...[but] they thought he was dead...I knew he was alive...I had seen him in Austin on the street. And so I decided I wanted to find him and let him see this exhibit...[see] that his music was being preserved and that he was considered important.¹¹⁶

Finding Ghost turned out to be the easy part. He lived right next door to where he had in the 1960s when Owens first met him, a home on East 11th Street near Interstate-35.

However, Williams had no interest in going to the exhibit at the Barker Center.

According to Owens, Grey Ghost, then in his eighties, said, “I’m sick and I’m tired and you know my life—that’s all over and in the past. I don’t want to talk about it.”¹¹⁷

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

According to Owens, the visit to the exhibit turned out to be gratifying for Grey Ghost after all:

We went across [the highway] to the Barker History Center and saw [the exhibit] and he was just astounded...He kind of vaguely remembered recording and vaguely remembered me. He vaguely remembered the 1940s recordings...but he never thought anything of it...I wanted him to hear his own music; it was real exciting. And it was real exciting for everybody there for him to be rediscovered...Texas music museum folks wanted him to play in a concert right away.¹¹⁸

Heartened by the enthusiasm and recognition of his music that the exhibit generated,

Williams agreed to allow Owens to book several concerts for him. As Owens recounted:

He was eighty-four years old at the time, and he did two or three concerts, and it looked like he was going to have another career going again...He

¹¹⁶ Tary Owens, interview with author, 30 July 2002.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

started playing and I was his manager and traveled with him. We went to New Orleans to the jazz festival, the Chicago Blues Festival, took the train out to San Francisco, played all over. He wouldn't get on an airplane... [So] anywhere we could go either in the car or by train we traveled [there].¹¹⁹

For Owens, this venture back into the music business included fulfilling his long-held dream of owning a record company. So in 1987, Owens partnered with his son, Willie Owens, and an old friend, Julie Howell, to found Catfish Records, which would specialize in Texas and Southern music. Owens resurrected the field recordings he had made of Williams back in the 1960s and produced Catfish's first release, *The Grey Ghost*. The album spanned Grey Ghost's career from the 1920s to the 1980s, and included a variety of styles ranging from barrelhouse piano and minstrel music to pop and jazz, all of which reflected Williams's wide-ranging talent and eclectic musical sensibilities. Although Williams had been playing piano since he was a teenager and performing for most of his life, this 1987 Catfish Records release was his first commercial recording.¹²⁰

From his relationship with Williams, Owens soon found additional opportunities to record and manage other musicians from throughout Central Texas. Before long Owens would release more recordings on the Catfish label, including some by Erbie Bowser and T.D. Bell, both native Texas bluesmen who had met while working in West Texas oilfields during the late 1940s. With Bowser on piano and Bell on guitar, the two began playing together at nightclubs in West Texas and New Mexico. By the 1950s, they had moved to Austin, renewed their musical partnership, and frequently performed with

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Tary Owens, personal archives from Owens's home, résumé.

the Grey Ghost, playing at such local venues as the Club Petit, Charlie's Playhouse, and the Victory Grill, owned by Johnny Holmes.¹²¹

Holmes, a musician, booking agent, and band manager, as Cheryl Simon has written, "opened the Victory Grill on Victory over Japan Day in 1945 as a restaurant and bar for black soldiers returning from the war. In the segregated South of the 1940s, these servicemen could not walk into just any place to have a beer." The East Austin club soon became a well-known venue for Texas blues, rhythm and blues, and jazz performers, as well as national touring acts, including Ike and Tina Turner, James Brown, Billie Holiday, B.B. King, Chuck Berry, and a young Janis Joplin. Located at 1104 East 11th Street, the club was on the "Chitlin' Circuit," a network of African-American clubs throughout the South in which black musicians could perform without fear of racial discrimination. During the Victory Grill's heyday of the 1950s and 1960s, music fans representing all races packed into the club. As one East Austin resident observed, "The street was so crowded you could barely walk. It was like New Orleans."¹²²

By the 1970s, Holmes closed the nightclub portion of the Victory Grill because of declining attendance and the general deterioration of the East Austin neighborhood. Two main factors contributed to this decline. Many affluent blacks moved to the suburbs as integration promoted more social mobility. Desegregation also opened the doors to black performers at formerly all-white venues and the need for a "Chitlin' Circuit" ceased to exist. As Owens began to work with many of the blues musicians who had performed at the Victory Grill, he wanted to bring attention not only to their music, but also to the importance of the club in Texas music history. In the summer of 1987 and coinciding

¹²¹ Cheryl L. Simon, "Erbie Bowser," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/BB/fboan.html> [accessed 8/27/2007].

with the state holiday, Juneteenth, which honors the 1865 emancipation of slaves in Texas, Owens staged the “Texas Blues Reunion” at the Victory Grill. The event brought musicians and fans together for a wonderful music weekend. This historic Austin “juke joint” closed for a period of time after a 1988 fire damaged part of the structure. Various fundraisers and restoration efforts over the years finally resulted in its reopening in 1996, and, on October 16, 1998, the Victory Grill was added to the National Register of Historic Places.¹²³

Over the next several years, Owens continued his work in addiction counseling, but he also remained involved with music promotion, production, and management. The second release for Catfish Records in 1989, *Texas Piano Professors*, spotlighted the talents of three Austin barrelhouse piano players and long-time friends—Ernie Bowser, Lavada Durst, and Grey Ghost.¹²⁴ Lavada Durst, a native of Austin, was born on January 9, 1913. Like many musicians of his generation, he taught himself to play piano, and “became a master at playing 1930s and 1940s ‘barrelhouse’ blues.” Hired by Austin’s KVET Radio in 1948, Durst, aka “Dr. Hepcat,” became the first black disc jockey in Texas. In 1955, he was “inducted into the unofficial Rock Radio Hall of Fame.”¹²⁵ Owens also produced Alfred “Snuff” Johnson, an Austin-based country blues guitarist and long-time friend of the “Piano Professors.”¹²⁶ Owens always tried to make sure that the musicians who recorded for him were paid well. Although many black artists had been exploited by the recording industry, Owens had a different ethic:

¹²² Quoted in, “Victory Grill,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victory_Grill [accessed 8/27/2007].

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Tary Owens, interview with author, 16 January 2003.

When I started managing [Ghost] I made sure that he got good money on everything that came out on the market under his name. Got him \$5,000 for that first album, which is \$4,000 above market value at that time. Most musicians were getting paid \$1,000 to do a record... Then got him \$5,000 for the next record too... that was Erbie and him [Ghost] and Lavada Durst... each of them got \$5,000 for ["Texas Piano Professors"].¹²⁷

Because of his close ties to Janis Joplin and his participation in the evolving Austin music scene of the 1960s, journalists and film producers frequently sought out Owens for his first-hand perspective on that era. Such was the case when two of his friends, Martha Hertzog and Paul Congo, asked Owens to be a consultant on documentary films they were producing about the Austin blues scene. Owens eventually became their partner and co-producer on three documentary films. One hour-long film, *A Tribute to Robert Shaw*, was produced in 1986 for the Black Arts Alliance of Austin. Another film documented the 1989 "Texas Blues Reunion" gathering at the Victory Grill, an event that Owens had produced. The third documentary focused on Grey Ghost telling his life story, but only a rough copy of the video was ever completed.¹²⁸

The years Owens had spent addicted to alcohol and drugs certainly took a toll on his professional career and his personal life resulting in both failed marriages and relationships. All of this began to change in the late 1980s, as Owens conquered his addictions and started a successful career in the music business. His life took another positive turn in the early 1990s when a mutual friend introduced Owens to Maryann Price, a Rhode Island-born singer and musician who moved to Austin in 1988. Price and her friend, Chris O'Connell, were singing at an Austin farmer's market one Saturday

¹²⁵ James Head, "Albert Lavada Durst," *The Handbook of Texas Music* (Austin: The Texas State Historical Association, 2003), 87-88.

¹²⁶ Tary Owens, interview with author, 13 March 2003.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

morning and Owens happened to be there shopping. According to Price, “he was shopping for bananas, no it was tomatoes. And he got a tomato alright—it was me.” The two had first crossed paths in California in the late 1960s while both were living in San Francisco. Price sang with a popular West Coast band, Dan Hicks and His Hot Licks. She recalled her time in California:

I didn’t go out there until 1969. I was too late for everything. I sang at the “Summer of Love” reunion with Dan Hicks and Naomi [Eisenberg]...when I got there the Haight was all boarded up; I mean all the little coffee shops and the head shops were all like these Texas towns. It looked like downtown Shamrock. Nothing happening. Clapboard all over the windows and the stores. And I thought, I didn’t come out here for this. But then the 1970s really needed help musically. And I’m glad I was there to give it a little infusion from Las Vegas.¹²⁹

While Owens lived in San Francisco, he went out to music clubs and festivals and had seen Price perform. When the couple was introduced, he knew who she was, but at first Price could not place Owens:

[Tary] had heard recordings that we were making because there was a pretty big splash with the Hot Licks. We were on the cover of the *Rolling Stone*...twice or three times...a lot of people really loved that band and still do...Tary knew of me from that. Now I of him, I didn’t know the name, but when he would tell me the bands that he played in...I recognized the names of the bands.¹³⁰

Having mutual interests, talents, and friends, Owens and Price soon began their relationship, which was tested early on. Price remembered, “Tary and I were just getting together in 1993, maybe 1994 at the latest. And so we took a trip in the car, which is the ultimate test—four cylinders, and Tary and me and the car.” They drove up the East

¹²⁸ Tary Owens, interview with author, 30 July 2002 and Tary Owens, personal archives résumé.

¹²⁹ Maryann Price, interview with author, tape recording, Austin, Texas, 10 December 2003.

Coast through the Carolinas, Virginia, and Maryland where Price spent many summers as a young girl. They were heading to Maine where Price's mother lived, but they stopped in New York City so Owens could visit with his friend, Myra Friedman, who had written *Buried Alive: The Intimate Biography of Janis Joplin*, for which Owens had contributed background information. After several days in Maine, Owens and Price drove to Montreal, Canada, and then south through Michigan to Grand Tower, Illinois, where Owens spent his early years. Price recalled the trip:

We both showed each other where we were brought up, that kind of thing. It was a very nice way to get started with the relationship. I saw all of Grand Tower from the house that he lived in...the guy that [now] lived there...had found a marble in the backyard that had been one of Tary's rare marbles...And he gave this marble to Tary...so Tary was thrilled by that. And then we camped out near there. Very romantic...had a great time.¹³¹

As they crossed back into Texas, Owens decided to stop in Crockett, where they roamed into an antique store and learned that it had once been the Jolly Joy Club, a popular blues venue. Owens asked the lady running the store if there were any musicians still around the Crockett area. According to Owens, she said, "Well, there's Frank Robinson, and there's Reverend Cooper, but he...plays Christian music now, and then there's Ervin Charles...and [Curtis] Guitar Colter." Delighted to still be "discovering" veteran Texas blues players as late as the 1990s, Owens decided to try and meet some of these local musicians while in town.¹³² For Price, conducting field studies, stopping to research the local music scene, and searching out musicians was a totally new experience. She remembered this first trip to Crockett:

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

So we pulled in and I said, oh look, a junk store, like a Goodwill, only privately owned. So we walked in, and I know Tary was dragging his feet a little behind me. There was a black woman sitting at the cashier desk there. And he kind of brightened up when he saw that black people ran it. And while I was over looking [around]...he's up at the front talking with the black woman...I could hear him talking, "Ma'am do you know of any musicians that play locally, here at Crockett, that you might tell us about?"...And she started rattling off these names...This was a treasure trove. We had walked into this place...that had turned out [to be] this jewelry box full of goodies.¹³³

Before they left Crockett that day, Owens and Price went over to Frank Robinson's house, introduced themselves, and sat down for a visit with the musician and his wife. As it turned out, Robinson was the nephew of Lightnin' Hopkins. On subsequent trips to Crockett where he met with these musicians, Owens persuaded Robinson, Colter, and Charles to come to Austin for a recording session, which resulted in the 1997 album, *Deep East Texas Blues*.¹³⁴ Price remembered that Robinson and the other musicians who recorded the album were very suspicious at first:

They came down here, but they couldn't believe that they were finally going to be on a record. This was like heaven to them. Best thing that every happened to them. Tary Owens—one of the white guys that they thought might cheat them. [They recorded] here in Austin at the old Lone Star Studios where Tary was a partner at the time, and man this was a real studio with glass. And...Jim Watts engineered it; I was there...[and] I played brushes on several of the tunes with Frank.¹³⁵

Sometime after Owens and Price began their relationship, they purchased a house in East Austin located on the banks of the Colorado River. The large brick house had

¹³² Tary Owens, interview with author, 30 July 2002.

¹³³ Price, interview with author, 10 December 2003.

¹³⁴ Tary Owens, interview with author, 30 July 2002.

¹³⁵ Price, interview with author, 10 December 2003.

plenty of room for the music instruments, recording equipment, assorted memorabilia, and archival materials that the two of them had accumulated during their lengthy music careers. A large porch stretched across the entire back length of the house where they could sit and look out at the river. Part of the appeal of this location for Owens was how much the place reminded him of his boyhood days growing up in Illinois along the banks of the Mississippi River. The couple married on May 17, 1997, at a ceremony held in their backyard, with friends and family there for the festivities. The Reverend Slim Richey, also a musician, officiated at the wedding.¹³⁶

Their East Austin home became a gathering place for an annual party of Owens's old friends from the Ghetto days of the 1960s, along with music colleagues and other Austin friends the couple had met over the years. With Price's assistance, Owens continued his work helping drug addicts. "We were both involved in recovery," Owens said, "helping other musicians get over drugs and alcohol; and I became the guy to look up if somebody was a musician and had a problem. Maryann and I were the people who could help them get help."¹³⁷ During this time Owens and Price opened their home to many musicians and artists seeking "a place of sanctuary and peace."¹³⁸

Owens and Price continued to pursue their separate musical careers, but they also sometimes performed together as Mary and Tary. Price's vocal techniques blend "western swing, jazz, studio pop and boogie-woogie" exhibiting the wide range of her talent. Following her stint with Dan Hicks out in California, Price moved to England in

¹³⁶ Maryann Price, e-mail to author, 12 September 2007.

¹³⁷ Tary Owens, interview with author, 30 July 2002.

¹³⁸ Brad Buchholz, "Producer Championed Austin Blues," sec. B 1, 5.

1973 and sang with the Kinks for one year.¹³⁹ Moving back to the States, she toured for some time as a vocalist with Ray Benson's western swing band, Asleep at the Wheel. After settling in Austin, Price performed at local venues and other music events around the state and nation, as well as giving private vocal lessons in her home. Although Owens's musical style and background differed from Price's, the two drew on each other strengths. "We've both been inducted into the Texas Music Hall of Fame," said Owens. "We're the only couple and we were nominated completely separately. It wasn't anything we did together that got us into the Hall of Fame...totally separate careers, but now we're [performing] together."¹⁴⁰

Throughout the 1990s, Owens continued recording and managing the careers of many of the blues musicians he had met through his connections with Grey Ghost, as well as from his own ongoing search for "forgotten" roots musicians. Over the years Owens "produced about thirty to forty CDs of all kinds of blues and Texas music in general." One such record was the critically-acclaimed 1999 release, *Lone Star Shootout*, showcasing the talents of Long John Hunter, Phillip Walker, Lonnie Brooks, and Ervin Charles.¹⁴¹ Another 1999 release, a self-produced sampler album, *Catfish, Carp & Diamonds: 35 Years of Texas Blues*, contained a selection of some of the best of Owens's 1960s field recordings.¹⁴² Owens once compared those field recordings to the carp, a fish not generally appreciated by Americans, but highly prized in other parts of the world. "Much of the music I've recorded is like that," he said. "It's not going to make the Top

¹³⁹ Mason Neely, "Maryann Price: She's Outside Austin City Limits," *The Metro West Daily*, 18 July 2007. <http://www.metrowestdailynews.com/archive/x603953044> [accessed 9/17/2007].

¹⁴⁰ Tary Owens, interview with author, 30 July 2002.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Buchholz, "Producer Championed, Austin Blues," sec. B 1, 5.

40. But it's music that is real and true, and speaks to the human heart."¹⁴³ Yet another historical compilation album, *Ruff Stuff: The Roots of Texas Blues Guitar*, featured among other artists the music of Owens's guitar mentors Mance Lipscomb and Bill Neely.¹⁴⁴

Jonathan Foose, a production partner of Owens, assisted on some of these releases, as well as the recording of such diverse musicians as San Antonio violin virtuoso Sebastian Campesi and bluesman Long John Hunter. Foose commented on Owens's work as a record producer: "Tary's talent, his spark—he could find people, dig them out of the woodwork. He would try anything in the studio." Foose observed that Owens brought together the very best musicians for studio work, combining instrumentations in very inventive ways.¹⁴⁵ Through all of the recordings Owens produced, he not only documented the music of these artists, but also helped revive their performing careers by helping them get booked at concerts and festivals across North America and Europe.¹⁴⁶

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

¹⁴³ Steve McVicker, "Lost Legends," *Houston Press*, 13 January 2000. https://hou.secure.newtimes.com/issues/2000-01-13/news/feature2_print.html, [accessed 2/15/2006].

¹⁴⁴ "Texas Music For Tary," <http://www.texasghetto.com/tmt/TMTbiog.html> [accessed 2/14/2006].

¹⁴⁵ Jonathan Foose, telephone interview with author, Austin, Texas, 10 October 2007.

¹⁴⁶ Rob Patterson, e-mail to Tary Owens, 21 June 2002.

The first year over there was...1992, I guess. I took T.D. and Erbie over there as a duo. And then came back the next year with them and their big band. And then subsequent trips with Frank Robinson and Guitar Curtis. [And] Snuff [Johnson] went over there. [Grey Ghost never went and]...neither did Lavada Durst. [Ghost]...wouldn't fly. They would have loved him over there...The last time I went to Europe...was in 1999...I went over with Blues Boy Hubbard and the Jets and...with Spot Barnett and Doug Sahn...I took him to Europe on the last trip. He died the same year we went over. He died later that year. [in November]¹⁴⁷

Tim Owens remembered his brother's traveling around the United States and to Europe and remarked that "Tary got a lot out of it and those old guys got a ton out of it. It was the highlight of their whole lives to go to Europe to play for blues festivals or Carnegie Hall. And then as those people's health failed, Tary was kind of the care giver, [particularly] for the Ghost."¹⁴⁸

The relationship Owens had with Grey Ghost was more than just as a professional music manager and producer. From 1986, when Owens reintroduced himself to Williams at the old musician's home on East 11th Street, until Ghost's death on July 19, 1996, their relationship grew very close. Owens said, "I took care of him like he was my grandfather for the rest of his life."¹⁴⁹ He helped launch the Ghost on a whole new career by arranging concert performances, traveling with him around the country to music festivals, producing his records, and helping manage his finances. Price commented on her husband's relationship with Grey Ghost:

Tary started to create booking dates, music jobs for him. Asked him if he wanted to play at Antone's happy hour, or the Continental Club—he got a gig [there] every single Monday night for years...He celebrated his last

¹⁴⁷ Tary Owens, interview with author, 16 January 2003.

¹⁴⁸ Tim Owens, interview with author, 13 December 2003.

¹⁴⁹ Tary Owens, interview with author, 30 July 2002.

birthday at the Continental...Tary...made sure that the owner of the Continental understood who this man was and what a treasure he is; [the club owner]hired him...[for every] single week until [Ghost] went into the nursing home.¹⁵⁰

During the filming of the Grey Ghost documentary, Owens drove the musician all around Central Texas to the locales that were part of the pianist's life—Bastrop, Taylor, Waco, Smithville, and Luling—a few of the places Grey Ghost had lived and performed. In many of those small towns around Austin, people still remembered hearing him play at nearby clubs or community centers. According to Owens, some locals remarked, “That Grey Ghost he was a live wire in this town!”¹⁵¹ Although some of those people Owens interviewed had been too young to go into the clubs, they had eagerly listened from outside in order to hear Grey Ghost perform.¹⁵²

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

I was getting him checked in, and I started hearing a bellowing voice, “Mr. Owens back here...Where's Mr. Owens?”...I was out front doing the paperwork. I came back. “Mr. Owens, they've taken my pants and everything. You need to take this for me.” And he handed me all these wads of rolled up \$20s and \$100s...it amounted to \$14,000 in his pockets. And he wanted me to take that...and go to his house and there's more there...altogether it was \$68,000...I know he'd made good money with

¹⁵⁰ Price, interview with author, 10 December 2003.

¹⁵¹ Tary Owens, interview with author, 11 March 2003.

¹⁵² Tary Owens, interview with author, tape recording, Austin, Texas, 5 April 2003.

me, but he didn't make that kind of money...He ended up making Maryann his banker.¹⁵³

As it turned out, Williams had worked at many jobs during his lifetime and lived in part off of his retirement from the Austin ISD. However, he also had made a lot of money from gambling and running gambling shacks. Owens and Price would use Grey Ghost's earnings to help care for him during his final years. When Williams could no longer live on his own, the couple chose a nursing home, Heritage Park, located on Martin Luther King, Jr., Boulevard in East Austin, where Grey Ghost lived for the final year of his life. Owens and Price had chosen this particular nursing home, in part, because it had a grand piano. Ever the entertainer, Grey Ghost sat down and played at this piano only two days before he died.¹⁵⁴ Williams had left instructions to be cremated and his ashes to be scattered by Owens, in an undisclosed location.¹⁵⁵

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

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

¹⁵³ Tary Owens, interview with author, 11 March 2003.

¹⁵⁴ Price, interview with author, 10 December 2003.

¹⁵⁵ Tary Owens, interview with author, 30 July 2002.

it, obviously. But we made the best of it...I loved him a lot and told him I would help him in any way that I could.¹⁵⁶

Because of the combination of serious ailments that had developed, Owens's treatment became quite expensive. By 1999, his medical expenses had placed a severe strain on the family finances. In order to help defray these costs, "an all-star lineup of leading Austin and Texas musicians" played a benefit concert, "Texas Music for Tary," at Antone's nightclub in December of that year. The fundraiser provided "the Austin music community and fans and friends of Texas music the chance to recognize and assist a key figure in the promotion and preservation of Texas music and its proud heritage."¹⁵⁷ Longtime friends and musicians, including Lucinda Williams, Jimmie Vaughan, Joe Ely, Marcia Ball, Lou Ann Barton, W.C. Clark, Paul Ray, and Toni Price came out to raise money for Owens's medical and living expenses.¹⁵⁸

Hospitalized around 2000, Owens came close to death. Brad Buchholz, a staff writer for the *Austin American-Statesman*, remembers that Owens called him from the hospital:

I remember him calling me from the hospital, in 2000 or 2001, thinking he was dying. It was the most amazing experience. He told me he finally scattered Grey Ghost's ashes—not because he wanted to, but because he was afraid he might die and leave the job undone. He'd kept the ashes in his home, so many years.¹⁵⁹

Despite his numerous ailments, Owens persevered. Relying on a combination of Western medicine and Eastern herbal remedies, Owens slowly regained his strength and

¹⁵⁶ Price, interview with author, 10 December 2003.

¹⁵⁷ "Texas Music For Tary," p. 2.

¹⁵⁸ Patterson, e-mail, 21 June 2002.

¹⁵⁹ Brad Buchholz, "Tary Owens – Oral History," e-mail to author, 19 January 2006.

saw himself on the way to recovery at the time of the interview in 2002: “The hepatitis C is gone. I still have it, but I’ve been taking Chinese herbs from a Chinese doctor...My liver functions are normal. My diabetes is under control. Parkinson’s disease is gone. Nothing short of miraculous.”¹⁶⁰

Once Owens regained his health, he wanted to get back to recording and performing and, as he stated, “I want to do the things that I either didn’t get a chance to do or finish.”¹⁶¹ Always ready to give support to the Texas music industry, Owens served on the board of the Texas Music Office, headed by Casey Monahan, a long-time friend of Owens. This office promotes music business and provides information about the state’s growing music industry to members of that industry and the general public.¹⁶² In 2001, Owens completed a project important to the preservation of Texas music history:

I took all those recordings, those tape recordings from the ‘60s that were all getting pretty old...We digitized it all, transferred it all onto...DAT, which is digital audio tape,...another digital format...I’ve got them on both, so it’s all preserved for another fifteen to twenty years until a new format.¹⁶³

During 2002, Owens recorded at least three CDs for other musicians, including an album he produced for a woman named Mary Lisa, that was scheduled for a fall release.¹⁶⁴ In spring 2002, Owens also released the first recording of his own music with his band, the Texas Redemptors. The aptly titled release, *Milagros* (Miracles), celebrated Owens’s near miraculous recovery. Joe Nick Patoski, a music writer and longtime friend

¹⁶⁰ Tary Owens, interview with author, 30 July 2002.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² *Texas Music Office*, “History and Purpose,” <http://www.governor.state.tx.us/divisions/music/about/history.html> [accessed 9/18/2007].

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

of Owens, wrote the album's liner notes and described the music. "Part slow belly rubbing romance, part field holler and blues lament, part church revival, and a whole lot of hootenanny and house party, this is what the Texas Redemptors are made of, never mind the technical details." Nine of the fourteen tracks on the CD are songs written by Owens, several in collaboration with his recording partner, Jonathan Foose. The CD also includes, "Mista Charlie," by legendary Texas bluesman, Lightnin' Hopkins, as well as Hoagy Carmichael's tune "Old Rockin' Chair." In addition to Maryann Price on vocals, a variety of other prominent Austin musicians contributed to the album, including W.C. Clark, Orange Jefferson, Pepi Plowman, Angela Strehli, Nick Connolly, Kaz Kazanoff, Slim Richey, Francie "Meaux Jeux" White, Sarah Brown, and Ed Vizard.¹⁶⁵

The 1990s Grey Ghost documentary, which existed only as a rough copy and needed professional editing, was one of the unfinished items on Owens's to-do list. He wanted to bring closure to his work on that video for historical and academic documentation of Grey Ghost's life. Also in need of organization were the vast personal archival materials Owens had accumulated through his music career, including record albums, audio-tapes, CDs, photographs, posters, personal papers, and other memorabilia. And, as Owens emphasized in an interview in 2002: "I also want to continue my music playing. I think playing music is one of the things that helped me keep going...health wise."¹⁶⁶

In June 2002, Owens played at the Navasota Blues Festival, an annual event founded in May 1996 to honor local blues great, Mance Lipscomb, and to raise money

¹⁶⁵ *Milagros*, CD, by the Texas Redemptors, liner notes, Joe Nick Patoski, Catfish Jazz, 2002.

¹⁶⁶ Tary Owens, interview with author, 30 July 2002.

for a college scholarship for a graduating senior at Navasota High School.¹⁶⁷ Although he was scheduled to play the festival again in 2003, he would not return. In November 2002 Owens was diagnosed with cancer, an invasive carcinoma located at the base of his tongue. Beginning radiation treatment with doctors in Austin, Owens remained optimistic that he would beat the disease. Tim Owens related the family's reaction to the diagnosis:

We have a friend of ours who's our age, graduated with us who has cancer...and survived. So we just thought all the same, that Tary would survive it...he said he'd beaten everything else, so we just kind of assumed he's gonna have luck against [cancer]. But after he started losing weight and not being able to swallow or drink, it just got to be more than he or Maryann could take care of. He needed more care and we finally convinced him to come here [Houston] to at least see what M.D. Anderson could do. And even when he first came, we had...hoped that they could get the stomach tube in him and get him built up and go back to Austin.¹⁶⁸

By the time Owens first arrived at M.D. Anderson in the summer of 2003, his condition had seriously deteriorated. On Sunday, August 24th a message went out to family and friends that the outlook was grim. The cancer had spread to Owens's lungs. Now he had pneumonia along with difficulty breathing, and he was heavily medicated as a result of the persistent pain.¹⁶⁹

News of Owens's condition prompted friends and music colleagues in Austin and around the country to send cards and letters and to call the hospital and express their concern. On August 25, Austin disc jockey Larry Monroe dedicated his KUT "Blue Monday" radio program in honor of Owens, a man who had done so much to preserve the

¹⁶⁷ *The Examiner*, "7th Annual Navasota Blues Festival," 29 June 2002, Supplement, p. 2 and 6.

¹⁶⁸ Tim Owens, interview with author, 13 December 2003.

¹⁶⁹ Saira Morgan, e-mail to Dr. Gary Hartman, 24 August 2003.

music and history of Texas blues artists.¹⁷⁰ Although doctors were able to stabilize Owens quickly and begin treatment for the pneumonia and chemotherapy to slow the spread of his tumors, Owens's chances for recovery were not good. He remained in the palliative care section of the hospital for several weeks before finally being transferred to a hospice care facility in Houston, where family and friends came to visit during his final days. He died on September 21, 2003, two months short of his sixty-first birthday.

In keeping with Tary's wishes, no formal funeral was conducted, and his remains were cremated. The Owens Family held a memorial gathering, "A Celebration of Tary Owens's Life," on the afternoon of October 11, 2003, "down by the riverside," at Owens's East Austin home. A recording of Roosevelt Williams performing the song, "You Ain't Nobody Till Somebody Loves You," served as a fitting prelude to the service, conducted by Tary's brothers, Tim and Bruce Owens, a Presbyterian minister. During the ceremony friends and colleagues of Tary's were given an opportunity to share their remembrances of him, and his niece, Megan Owens, sang "Amazing Grace" and "Will the Circle be Unbroken," with help from the congregation. On behalf of the Center for Texas Music History at Texas State University-San Marcos, Dr. Gary Hartman presented Maryann Price a plaque honoring Tary Owens for his important role in shaping Texas music history. A recording of Tary singing, "Ragged But Right," was played as a requiem for the service.¹⁷¹

Tary Owens's legacy to Texas music begins with his collection of field recordings preserved at the University of Texas Folklore Center Archives, ca. 1928-1981, located in

¹⁷⁰ "Blue Monday," KUT Radio, tape recording, author's personal collection.

¹⁷¹ The Owens Family, "A Celebration of Tary Owens's Life: In Memoriam, Nov. 6, 1942-Sept. 21, 2003," 11 October 2003. This program is from the memorial service and is part of author's personal collection.

the Center for American History. This archive includes the collected recordings and other papers of such Texas folklore luminaries as John Lomax, William A. Owens, John Henry Faulk, and Américo Paredes, Owens's teacher and mentor. The field recordings Owens compiled from 1964-1966 formed the foundation of the archival and recording work he focused on for the rest of his life. The music history contained in his recordings is preserved and accessible for research by scholars and music enthusiasts.¹⁷² After his own recovery from addictions and absence from the music business, Owens dedicated himself with a passion to resurrecting the "roots music" he loved. By recording and promoting, in any way he could, the musicians who played that music, Owens efforts put money in their pockets and gained those musicians long overdue recognition for their artistry.

¹⁷² "A Guide to the UT Folklore Center Archives, ca. 1928-1981, <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/taro/utcah/00385/cah-00385.html> [accessed 10/14/2007].

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

What were the early influences in the life of Tary Owens that directed him into a career as a folklorist and musician? Owens seemed, from a very early age, to love music—not just listening, but also performing. He evidenced little shyness about taking the stage to sing, dance, and entertain an audience, so perhaps his talent for performance was indeed inherited from both of his musician grandfathers. From a childhood spent in small town, rural America, Owens developed a love for exploring the fields, hills, and caves he found along the banks of the Mississippi River in Illinois. Finding arrowheads and other implements left behind long ago by Native Americans fostered Owens’s love for exploring and collecting, a passion that continued throughout his life.

When Louis Owens moved his family to Texas in the mid-1950s, he was seeking the opportunities Beaumont and Port Arthur afforded for a better paying job created by the shipbuilding, petrochemicals, and support industries of that area. The Owens Family benefited from the growing prosperity of post-World War II America and lived a comfortable, middle-class life. Tim Owens described this area as having a “very eclectic mix of people because [Port Arthur] was still a seaport town, but it was also more Louisiana than Texas even though...on the Westside of the Sabine [River].”¹⁷³ As is

¹⁷³ Tim Owens, interview with author, 13 December 2003.

frequently the case in border regions such as this area known as “The Golden Triangle,” cultures merge in new and fascinating combinations.

The mix of music genres that young Owens was exposed to in Texas was an example of those fascinating combinations. As George Ward has written, “Texas music was born at the crossroads of America...Name virtually any style of music and there is a Texas musician whose popularity and influence have been enormous and pivotal in that genre.”¹⁷⁴ This is particularly true for the “Golden Triangle,” where Tary Owens listened to rock and roll, blues, jazz, and many other kinds of music played on local radio stations and available at local record stores. When he was in high school, Owens drove with his friends to live music clubs along the Texas-Louisiana border, soaking in the sounds of blues and jazz—two kinds of music Owens came to love. That circle of friends, including Janis Joplin and other classmates, certainly influenced Tary during his high school years. Classmate Jack Smith said of this group that it “kind of coalesced around self-expression and appreciation of it...It was all a pretty dynamic group and...built around intellectual acquisition, intellectual sharing...that’s what really hung everybody together there for a while.”¹⁷⁵

After high school graduation, Owens attended college at Lamar Tech in Beaumont. While enrolled in an English course taught by Frank Abernathy, Owens became particularly interested in music as part of folklore through a project assigned in this course. Owens also started learning to play bass guitar and, by 1962, decided that he wanted to attend the University of Texas at Austin to major in folklore studies focusing on music. He moved to Austin to follow that dream. Enrolling at the University in 1963

¹⁷⁴ George B. Ward, “Texas Music,” Forward to *The Handbook of Texas Music*, viii.

¹⁷⁵ Jack Smith, interview with author, 30 April 2004.

as an English major, Owens was about to embark on studies that led to his life's work in folklore and music history.

Owens's first Austin residence was an apartment complex dubbed the Ghetto, home to several students who were friends from Port Arthur, as well as Powell St. John and John Clay, both accomplished musicians and songwriters. Owens, Janis Joplin, and other friends from the Ghetto attended the weekly "folksings" at the University's student union building. The folk song revival movement, which began on college campuses on the east coast in the 1960s, had taken hold at the University of Texas, and Austin became a focal point for a growing music scene within state.

Owens, Joplin, St. John, Clay, and several other university students also began attending the weekly music gathering at Kenneth Threadgill's bar on North Lamar Boulevard and eventually were incorporated into Threadgill's house band. The crowd that gathered for the music each week was a mix of university students, other young folks, and working class people. This type of crowd, "hippies and rednecks," also supported music at the Armadillo World Headquarters, an Austin music venue that opened in 1970. Many music clubs opened in Austin during the 1960s, providing performance venues for the growing Austin music scene.

When Owens began his college work at the University of Texas, he enrolled in English classes taught by two renowned folklore professors, Américo Paredes and Roger Abrahams. Appreciating the enthusiasm and keen interest Owens had for folklore studies, the professors suggested he apply for a Lomax Foundation grant to study the folk music of Central Texas. Owens received the grant, which he used to purchase recording equipment, and, from 1964 to 1966, traveled around Texas doing field recordings of a

wide variety of Texas musicians. This collection, now housed at the UT Folklore Center Archives, helped document the music of Texas artists and preserve the history of these musicians for future generations. Owens's collection is included with the recordings of Texas folklorists who preceded him—John Lomax, William A. Owens, and Américo Paredes to name a few. The Owens Collection is considered an important part of the University's folklore archive.

After Owens graduated from the University of Texas, he spent many years pursuing his own music career, first in California fronting his own bands and working as a record producer, and then back in Texas, living in Houston and Austin for various periods of time. By the early 1980s, Owens realized that he needed professional therapy to rid himself of the addictions to alcohol and drugs that had hurt his professional career and personal relationships. For a number of years, Owens put the music business aside and worked to stay clean and sober by counseling other people who faced AIDS or struggled with addictions. Bill Bentley, an executive with Warner Brothers Records, said, "Tary struck me as a person who was so relieved not...to be addicted to drugs that he had gotten a second chance at life."¹⁷⁶ Friends such as Bentley knew that helping others was a natural instinct for Owens: "He knew on a real ground-floor level what it meant to be a good human being and reminded a lot of us how to go about doing it. He was as good a teacher as any of us ever had, on or off the bandstand. Texas music never had a better friend."¹⁷⁷

Beginning in 1986, Owens ventured back to music by reconnecting with some of the musicians he had recorded in the 1960s—producing commercial releases of music

¹⁷⁶ Bill Bentley, e-mail to author, 13 July 2004.

¹⁷⁷ Brad Buchholz, "Producer Championed Austin's Blues," sec. B 1, 5.

from his field recordings collection, as well as new recordings, and promoting and managing the rejuvenated careers for some of those musicians. In evaluating the impact Owens had on preserving Texas music history, Rob Patterson, an Austin music writer, “points to Owens’s recordings of [Mance] Lipscomb, now archived at UT’s [Center for American History], as some of the best versions of the great Delta blues guitarist he has ever heard.” Casey Monahan, director of the Texas Music Office, commented on the legacy of Owens to Texas music, citing Owens’s recordings and promotion of the Grey Ghost as some of the most important work Owens accomplished:

Tary’s life was about rebirth. He gave many artists second chances. He had a keen ear for music indigenous to our state. He had the will to not just enjoy it, but create the means for other people to enjoy it. And he emerged from his own lost years with such an incredible desire to document and release Texas blues and other roots music.¹⁷⁸

The list of Texas blues musicians recorded by Owens is long, but includes Roosevelt T. Williams, aka. the Grey Ghost, Mance Lipscomb, Erbie Bowser, T.D. Bell, Lavada Durst, Snuff Johnson, Long John Hunter, Frank Robinson, Curtis Colter, and many others. Joe Nick Patoski, a music writer and friend of Owens, said, “Tary gave a lot of cats a reason to go play again. And he revived folklore studies. Not in an academic way, but in the streets, getting out there and making sure these guys were heard again.”¹⁷⁹

Tim Owens remembered going to visit Tary over the years and commented on his brother’s ability to find the best places to go to really appreciate Austin. “He was always searching,” Tim said, “and he knew the right spots to look. How he acquired that,

¹⁷⁸ Steve McVicker, “Tary Owens, 60, Texas Bluesman,” *Houston Chronicle*, September 2003, <http://www.maryannprice.com/houston.html> [accessed 8/28/2007]. Rob Patterson and Casey Monahan were interviewed by Steve McVicker for this article written after the death of Tary Owens.

¹⁷⁹ Quoted in, Steve McVicker, “Lost Legends,” [accessed 2/15/2006].

whether it's in nature, or nurtured, or learned, I don't know, but he had that ability to go out and find those little gems. And a lot of those little gems were people."¹⁸⁰ The passion Tary Owens had for helping people and the passion he had for music combined to form the basis for his life's work—the preservation of Texas music history.

¹⁸⁰ Tim Owens, interview with author, 13 December 2003.

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VITA

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