

Story and photographs by Randy Mallory

**Two-steppin' and toe-tappin'
to the jazzy sounds of...**

Western Swing

On its front door, Austin's celebrated honky-tonk, the Broken Spoke, boldly proclaims:
"Through this door pass the best country music dancers in the world."

Sure enough, as I mosey inside the low-ceilinged, neon sign-draped dancehall, couples smoothly circle counterclockwise around a large wooden dance floor. Two-steppers form a colorful flow of Western wear--men outfitted in cowboy boots and hats, and women shoe-horned into tight-fitting jeans and sequined skirts. Barmaids deftly ferry drinks to dancers sitting this one out, at tables topped with red-checkered cloths.

On a tiny, low stage at one end of the floor, fiddler Alvin Crow and his Pleasant Valley Boys--regulars at the club--belt out irresistible, rhythmic Western Swing music. The driving two-four beats of drums, bass, and closed-chord rhythm guitar set my feet tapping in time. The mournful wail of a steel guitar and the lilt of Alvin's jazzy fiddle pull at my heartstrings.

In a side room called the "Tourist Trap," club owners James and Annetta White show off playbills, autographed photos, and other memorabilia of country-western legends who performed here--such as Willie Nelson, Roy Acuff, Ray Price, Ernest Tubb, and Floyd Tillman. The faux-museum even boasts a cowboy hat, boots, and half-smoked cigar of James' musical hero, Bob Wills, the King of Western Swing.

Perusing the Tourist Trap, I bump into a couple of tourists from Missouri eager to experience "real Texas music." I assure them they've come to the right place for one of the most "Texas" of Texas musical styles.

*W*estern Swing remains, indeed, one of the few American roots musical styles born in Texas and the Southwest.

The roots of Western Swing grow from the West Texas plains around the turn of the 20th century. Rural families socialized at ranch dances, held on outdoor platforms or in barns and homes. Simple string bands--fiddle, guitar, banjo, and sometimes mandolin--played Old World hoedowns, waltzes, and schottisches, as well as American folk and cowboy songs.

You still can two-step to ranch dance music in the northeastern corner of the Texas Panhandle in tiny Lipscomb (pop. 38 people and 160 wild turkeys). Debby Opdyke and Jan Luna operate the Naturally Yours Dance Platform next to their art gallery. On the third Saturday night, June through September, several hundred folks show up for pit barbecue and open-air dancing to the music of string bands featuring fiddlers Lanny Fiel (who teaches ranch dance music to young players) and Frankie McWhorter (who once played with Bob Wills).

A hundred miles south of Lipscomb, near Turkey, a young Bob Wills learned his musical licks in a similar environment during the 1910s and 1920s. Wills played fiddle with his father at ranch dances. He also labored in cotton fields, picking up blues and jazz styles from black coworkers.

In 1929 Wills moved to Fort Worth and linked with others eager to blend white and black styles. Wills partnered with singer Milton Brown and guitarist Herman Arnspiger to form the Light Crust Doughboys. Burrus Mill and Elevator Company hired them to promote its flour on live radio shows aired by Fort Worth's powerful WBAP. The string band garnered fans statewide. (The Light Crust Doughboys radio show lasted until the 1950s, and the band, with different members, still performs today.)

In the 1930s, Brown formed his own band, the Musical Brownies, while Wills formed the Texas Playboys. Their early innovations created what, a decade later, would be dubbed Western Swing (a term credited to West Coast swing musician, Spade Cooley).

At the time, big swing bands--like Tommy Dorsey's and Harry James'--dominated the airwaves and dancehalls. To compete, Brown and Wills added musicians and adopted sophisticated jazz styles with complex chord progressions and fluid improvisational solos.

With Brown on vocals, the Brownies comprised the prototype Western Swing group--two fiddles, guitar, banjo, bass, steel guitar, and piano. To boost his sound, Brown added electric-amplified guitars, a first in country music. His influence was cut short when he died in a car wreck in 1936.

Wills moved the Texas Playboys to Tulsa, Oklahoma. He muscled up the band by adding drums and horns to a rhythm section comprised of upright bass, banjo, and rhythm guitar. The Texas Playboys' hot swinging sound could keep dancers hoppin' even in the noisiest dancehalls.

In 1940, Wills scored the first of many national hits, "New San Antonio Rose." The charismatic band leader even launched a Hollywood film career.

The music that Bob Wills popularized lost much of its national prominence after World War II. But in the Lone Star State, the music lived on in honky-tonks and festivals because it could swing, says America's best-known Western Swing fiddler, Johnny Gimble of Dripping Springs.

"Western Swing is big band jazz played on strings, rather than horns," says Johnny, an ex-Playboy who still performs around the state and hosts a swing fiddle camp each summer in New Mexico. "We do it like Milton Brown and Bob Wills did--players get to solo and improvise. When Bob pointed his fiddle bow at you, he expected your best shot--play something different so songs never sounded the same twice. Then at the end, everybody jammed together like a Dixieland band."

Improvisation sets Western Swing apart from commercial country music. Young musicians "get it" at South Plains College in Levelland, where Joe Carr teaches a Western Swing class as part of the commercial music program. "Most of our kids go into Top 40 country music. But, unlike Top 40, players solo in Western Swing, so students love it." The kids take their show on the road in the school's Western Swing band, the South Plains Playboys, which performs at festivals such as the annual Bob Wills Day in Turkey (Apr. 22-24, 2004).

For more than 30 years, Western Swing devotees have gathered each spring at Turkey's old high school (also site of a Bob Will Museum) for three days of swing music from former Texas Playboys.

Many avid festival-goers are lifelong swing musicians themselves. They circle their RVs in Turkey for all-day impromptu jam sessions. Like the veterans on the festival schedule, they play familiar standards like "Maiden's Prayer," "Roly Poly," "Ida Red," "Corine, Corina," "Take Me Back to Tulsa," and the beloved "Faded Love."

Such standards fill the bills at other major Western Swing festivals in Texas.

At Belton's Texas Western Swing Fiddling Showcase (Mar. 20, 2004), a new generation of swing musicians give the standards their own twist. Last year's show included hot-shot fiddlers Randy Elmore of Fort Worth and Jason Roberts of Austin, plus trumpeter Dave Alexander of Dallas.

Dave's father, trombonist Ashley Alexander Jr., played in bands with both Bob Wills and his brother, Johnnie Lee Wills. The young band leader aims to carry on Bob Wills' music as well as his showmanship. Dave and his "Big Texas Swing Band" perform each year at the Houston Livestock Show, where he rides into the arena on a golden palomino horse while singing a swinging tune. (Dave also produces a radio series, "The World of Western Swing," which airs on Dallas station KHYI, 95.3 FM, and Tyler station KKUS, 104.1 FM.)

In San Marcos, the Texas Natural & Western Swing Festival (May 21-22, 2004) showcases former Texas Playboys. (Last year's festival included Playboy exes vocalist Glynn Duncan, fiddler Bob Boatright, pianist Herb Remington, and bassist Louise Rowe, the only female *musician* Wills ever hired. He hired many women singers). The festival also presents a new roster of inductees to the Texas Western Swing Hall of Fame at a stage show on the banks of the San Marcos River. (NAMES OF 2004 INDUCTEES TO COME....)

Other annual Western Swing events include: the Legends of Western Swing Music Festival in Wichita Falls (June 3-5, 2004), the West Texas Western Swing Music Festival in Snyder (June 8-12, 2004), the Legends of Western Swing Show and Dance in Navasota (July 24, 2004), the Red Steagall Cowboy Gathering and Western Swing Festival in Fort Worth (Oct. 22-24, 2004), the Cowboy Christmas Ball in Round Rock (Dec. 3, 2004), and the Cowboy Christmas Ball in Crowell (Dec. 18, 2004).

Of the hundreds of musicians who played with Bob Wills, only 50 or so remain, says one of the most popular former Playboys, singer Leon Rausch of Fort Worth. Rausch and ex-Playboy guitarist, Tommy Allsup, form the nucleus of the Bob Wills' Texas Playboys band, which maintains an active concert schedule.

Like most Playboy exes these days, Rausch mostly plays concerts instead of dances. "Old-timers like us can't play a dance for four hours straight like we used to," he says with a laugh.

Even in concert, Western Swing's infectious beat keeps listeners squirming in their seats. Fiddler Johnny Gimble calls it "itchy feet": "When the music's swinging, it's hard to keep your feet still."

That beat, says Leon Rausch, is why Western Swing has survived six decades virtually in tact.

"This is happy music. Even when the lyrics are sad, the dance beat lifts your spirits," Leon explains. "Back in the early days, Bob Wills had a big hand in getting people past their worries--the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl days, and World War II. We're still doing that today."

During the 1950s and 1960s, Western Swing took a backseat to rock and roll and "tears in your beer" honky-tonk music. Many Western Swing musicians kept their day jobs but also kept playing just for the love of it. Others, most notably Hank Thompson and the Brazos Valley Boys, found commercial success with both Western Swing and honky-tonk styles. (Thompson ends his 58-year career with a 2004 tour. Check for Texas dates at www.hankthompson.net.)

Bob Wills died of pneumonia in 1975 and was buried in Tulsa's Memorial Park. His epitaph quotes a line from his song, "San Antonio Rose": "Deep within my heart lies a melody."

But before his death, the King witnessed a Western Swing revival. Country star Merle Haggard paid him homage in a 1970 album, *A Tribute to the Best Damn Fiddle Player in the World*. Wills released his own final album with the Texas Playboys, *For the Last Time*, in 1974, and, two years later, Texas historian Charles Townsend authored a biography, *San Antonio Rose; The Life and Music of Bob Wills*.

Austin's burgeoning music scene of the 1970s also helped restart the Western Swing metronome. To promote roots music, a then-fledgling public television show called *Austin City Limits* featured Texas Playboys reunions several times. And local band leaders, such as Ray Benson of Asleep at the Wheel and Alvin Crow, introduced the swinging style to young listeners at venues like the Armadillo World Headquarters and the Broken Spoke, which opened in 1964.

Benson's Asleep at the Wheel became the national torchbearer of the Western Swing comeback.

"From the start, the band tried to reconnect with America's musical roots. We were fascinated with the cross-fertilization of cultural traditions found in Western Swing," explains Ray, who was designated by the Legislature as the 2004 Texas State Musician. "When I found Bob Wills music, I knew that's the style I wanted to perform in a modern big band setting. This guy was amazing. He was the Elvis of his time!"

Two of Ray and the Wheel's many albums are tributes to the King of Western Swing (1993's *Tribute To The Music Of Bob Wills* and 1999's *Ride with Bob*). The band's consistently swinging sound has won nine Grammys--most recently for a rendition of a Wills' hit, "Cherokee Maiden," in 2000, the same year the group toured Europe with Bob Dylan.

"We're not trying to make this mainstream music. We're just trying to keep it alive and well. Like bluegrass, Western Swing is one of the great traditions of America music, and it ain't going away."

Back at Austin's Broken Spoke, I watch the two Missouri tourists glide around the dance floor as Alvin Crow launches into a wild fiddle solo. The couple seem to have found what they were looking for--a "real Texas music" experience.

Indeed, by blending old fiddle tunes with jazz, blues, and ethnic sounds (Mexican, German, and Cajun), Western Swing still reflects the cultural heritage of Texas and the Southwest.

Besides, as fiddle virtuoso Johnny Gimble likes to say, "It don't mean a thing if it don't have that swing."