

# Western Swing

by Guy Logsdon

Western swing has become the traditional music of Oklahoma. While it was "born in Texas," it was Tulsa where it matured, and one of the major figures in its development – Johnnie Lee Wills – still lives in Tulsa and continues to play dances there. And the man who took western swing from the Southwest to the nation and to international audiences – Hank Thompson – lives near and works out of Tulsa.

A cultural blend of musical styles, western swing has one primary characteristic – a danceable beat. While country and bluegrass music primarily emerged as listening traditions, the principal audience for western swing is a dancing crowd. If the listeners on a Saturday night outnumber the dancers, the band has failed at playing good western swing.

Cowboys loved to dance; if women were not available, they danced with each other, calling it a "stag dance." In the late 19th century, as the range cattle industry moved northward and the cotton industry moved westward, the cowboys' music and passion for dancing began to blend with the Black blues brought from the cotton fields. The blend effected a change in fiddle styles, the fiddler adopting a slower "long bow" technique and adding blues improvisations. Also, the fiddler became sufficiently versatile to accompany any popular style of dancing.

Bob Wills – the "Daddy of Western Swing" – was born into a Texas fiddling tradition. Although he grew up hearing and playing ranch house dances, as his father was a cotton farmer, he was exposed to the work music and blues of the Black workers in the cotton fields. After holding a variety of jobs as a young man, in 1929 Bob played as a "blackface" fiddler in a medicine show in Ft. Worth, where he met a young guitarist, Herman Arnspiger. As a team they started playing house dances in Ft. Worth and were soon joined by a singer, Milton Brown. In 1931 they took the name The Original Light Crust Doughboys and advertised the Burrus-Milling Elevator Company products over the radio and through personal appearances. Because the company's general manager, W. Lee O'Daniel, did not want them to play dances, Milton left and, soon afterwards, Bob organized his own band. O'Daniel disliked Bob and through financial influence with radio stations forced Wills out of Texas as well as Oklahoma City. As a last desperate try, Bob and his manager, O.W. Mayo, convinced KVOO Radio management in Tulsa to give them a chance to perform on February 9, 1934. They

Johnnie Lee Wills' Western Swing band.





were an immediate success, and when O'Daniel tried to interfere, it was he, not Wills, who had to leave. As a result, Tulsa soon became the Capital of Western Swing; ultimately the four most popular western swing bands called Tulsa their home.

Within six years Bob and His Texas Playboys were favorites throughout the Southwest, and musical legends were beginning to emanate from Cain's Ballroom, their headquarters. Their popularity was based on their ability to play any kind of danceable music: waltzes, polkas, and two-steps, as well as ballads and fox trots. Furthermore, they never priced themselves beyond the pocket-book of the working man.

In 1940, Bob successfully worked in California and, with the outbreak of the war, found great demand for his music on the West Coast. He encouraged his brother, Johnnie Lee Wills, who had been a Texas Playboy when they arrived in Tulsa, to organize his own band and helped him in doing so. When World War II dissolved the Texas Playboys and Bob moved to California in 1942, Johnnie Lee Wills and All His Boys continued the daily radio shows and the dances at Cain's Ballroom. In fact, many Southwesterners who with fondness recall listening to Bob actually had been listening to Johnnie Lee.

By the late 1950s, rock-and-roll and television had changed the dancing habits in the Southwest. In 1964, Johnnie Lee disbanded his group after thirty years of playing a radio show and one dance six days and nights each week. Since then he has been in demand for dances and personal appearances, but not at the grueling pace of the past. Nearing seventy, Johnnie Lee Wills has provided dancing entertainment in Tulsa and the Southwest for 49 years. No other western swing leader can lay claim to having played as many dances as he has.

Leon McAuliffe joined the Texas Playboys in Tulsa in 1935 and became the first full-time steel guitarist in country-western music. His music was influential in making the steel guitar the popular instrument it is today. Following the war, Leon organized his Cimarron Boys, and the Cimarron Ballroom in Tulsa became their headquarters. He continues to be a popular attraction with the Original Texas Playboys, but he disbanded the Cimarron Boys in 1968.

Hank Thompson and His Brazos Valley Boys moved to Tulsa in the late 1950s, but his career started in Texas in 1945. Hank is the leading second generation band leader. His accomplishments are legion, one of which was to be the first to take western swing to northern and eastern states as well as abroad. He continues to live near Tulsa and to play at least two hundred dances each year.

A very important, but now nearly forgotten swing band, moved to Tulsa in 1942 – Al Clauser and the Oklahoma Outlaws. They played at the Crystal City dance hall in southwestern Tulsa and over KTUL radio station. In the mid-1940s a young girl, Clara Ann Fowler, became their featured singer and produced her first record with them; she became nationally famous as Patti Page. Al continued to make appearances until 1968; he, too, still lives near Tulsa.

The western swing band requires fiddles, drums, a bass fiddle, horns, a steel guitar and a rhythm guitar, performing a strong heavy rhythmic style. The voicing of the fiddles provides the distinctive sound for each band: Bob Wills voiced his fiddles to play harmony above the lead fiddle; Leon McAuliffe voiced his below the lead to simulate a saxophone-trombone effect; Spade Cooley, an Oklahoman who had a popular California band, used arrangements which voiced the fiddles above the lead, punctuating the music with a strong staccato sound.

The sound and the quality of western swing music was determined by the leader. Musicians "play better" behind an outstanding leader, and the greatest of the leaders have made Tulsa their home.

*Suggested reading:*

Malone, Bill C. *Country Music, U.S.A.* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1968).

Townsend, Charles R. *San Antonio Rose: The Life and Music of Bob Wills.* (Urbana, Illinois: The University of Illinois Press, 1976).

*Suggested listening:*

*Dance All Night with Johnnie Lee Wills and His Boys.* Delta Records, DLP-1132.

*The Bob Wills Anthology.* Columbia Records, KG32416.

*"Take It Away Leon..."* Leon McAuliffe and The Cimarron Boys. Stoneway Records, ST4-139.