
“From the very start, something about Bob’s music was different...”

Welcome to ‘The Music of Bob Wills’ as told by historian and writer David Stricklin. David heads the Butler Center for Arkansas Studies in Little Rock. He received his Ph.D. in U.S. history from Tulane University, where he studied with legendary country music authority Bill C. Malone. His father, Al Stricklin, played piano with Bob from 1935 to 1942, from time to time with him in the 1950s and ‘60s, and with the Texas Playboys after Bob’s death in 1975 until Al’s death in 1986. This synopsis largely focuses on Bob’s earlier years and is an information piece prepared for the Bob Wills Swing School.

The Music of Bob Wills *by David Stricklin*

DIFFERENT, CREATIVE, FREE

Al Stricklin was working at KFJZ radio in Fort Worth in 1930 when Bob Wills came to the studio with band mates Milton Brown and Herman Arnspiger. They had a string band with Wills on the fiddle, Arnspiger playing the guitar, and Brown doing most of the vocals, and they wanted a show on the station. That day, Al was the acting program director. He asked Bob what kind of music they played, and Bob answered: “Different.”

To understand Bob’s music, it is important to look back to the early days when he and Milton Brown and several other musicians in and around Fort Worth were creating something not quite like any other music. It came to be called Western Swing, but its roots are all over the place.

Bob cared about whether a song made people happy and would get them to dance. His experiences and training grew from the rich dance traditions of Southern and Texas fiddling. People would move furniture out and have neighbors over for a dance that lasted well into the night. The house or ranch dance experience helped inspire the great 1945 Wills tune “Stay a Little Longer,” the chorus of which says: “Stay all night, stay a little longer; dance all night, dance a little longer. Take off your coat, throw it in the corner. I don’t see why you don’t stay a little longer.”

Bob arrived in Fort Worth determined to play many different kinds of songs. Initially, he worked with very small groups so most of what he and his band mates did sounded somewhat like the music of other string bands. But from the very start, something about Bob’s music was different.

It drew from the strongest currents of popular music at the time, blues and jazz. The recording industry was still in its early stages, and people were listening to the songs of Bessie Smith and Mamie Smith, the great blues singers, and the exuberant jazz of Joe “King” Oliver and Louis Armstrong and other soon-to-be legends who helped name the 1920s the “jazz age.”

Bob loved blues music. He especially loved the singing of Bessie Smith and later said that he styled some of his own tenor vocals on her example. He was drawn to the blues in part by the way many blues songs made fun of hard times and didn’t wallow in self-pity. He could play soulful blues solos on fiddle, as in his extraordinary solo in “Bob Wills Special” from 1940.

Blues strains were found in much of the jazz of the 1920’s, and Bob loved jazz music too. In his early years, he drew on the energy of jazz tunes, the way many were written and performed and the boisterous combination of solo and rhythm instruments.

Bob worked with some remarkable, broad-minded musicians in Fort Worth, especially Milton Brown. They played dances, created a huge fan base on the radio, and got hired to form what became the Light Crust Doughboys. They also began composing some of their own songs. When Bob left the Doughboys in 1933 and formed his own group, he had the basic outline of what became his mark on the musical world. He really brought it to its fulfillment, though, only when he got to Tulsa and set up his long-term base camp with the Texas Playboys.

THE TULSA YEARS

The music they produced in Tulsa is nothing short of extraordinary. To the standard string band rhythm section of fiddle, bass fiddle, acoustic guitar and banjo, he added a steel guitar, an instrument used by popular bands in Fort Worth. He also added a piano, which some of the Fort Worth bands were doing too. Then, he did what was previously unthinkable and added drums. Having broken the logical boundary line between him and other string bands, he went on and added a horn section. He may not have been the first to include horns, but he was the first to give them prominence in Western Swing.

As they perfected their sound in Tulsa, Bob's band used one trumpet, one trombone, and one saxophone. Pretty soon he added a standard electric guitar and, later, he added more horns and gave the Texas Playboys a "big band" dimension during that era in U.S. musical history. Initially, the Tulsa-era band consisted of about a dozen pieces, which gave Bob an immense amount of flexibility and the thing he craved in music more than just about anything: freedom.

The early recordings from the Tulsa years were remarkable. The very first Texas Playboy record was made in September 1935 in a Dallas warehouse under the direction of legendary recording supervisor Art Satherley. The song was a maniacal fiddle tune called "Osage Stomp," featuring a sassy fiddle lick followed by two loud thumps by the entire rhythm section. The exuberance and abandonment were unlike virtually anything being recorded at the time. Bob plays a long section of the melody—the listener can nearly always tell it's Bob playing if he isn't calling out to the other musicians—then he finishes and goes to his famous "holler," introducing and encouraging the other players.

Bob would break meter in his playing, which led some "legitimate" musicians to think he didn't know enough about music to adhere to the time signature of a piece. Breaking meter, holding notes longer than the ordinary number of beats in a measure or playing more notes before the ordinary end of a passage and what should have been the beginning of the next verse, were common to blues and other music played by people who nearly always learned songs by ear. Musicians with formal training and at least an elementary knowledge of music theory often thought such practices were evidence of ignorance. Bob and many other players who broke meter did it because it was expressive. Musicians who wanted to play with Bob had to know how to hang in there with him while he held passages.

For instance, listen to Bob's vocals and stirring fiddle duet with Jesse Ashlock on "Sittin' on Top of the World" from their September 1935 recordings. The fiddle duet is so relaxed it's almost languid, but it keeps the beat and the mood of the song. It's a great example of how the blues treats hard luck with the ironic mischief of somebody used to dealing with whatever life brings along. With all his troubles and the fact that his lover has left him, he can still say, "I don't worry. I'm sittin' on top of the world."

THE BOB WILLS DANCE

The "Bob Wills dance" was an institution in the south-central Midwest in the 1930s, synonymous with fun. People who scrounged up the quarter or so it cost to get in knew they would get at least a 4-hour respite from the crushing Great Depression.

People in and around Tulsa knew that Cain's Dancing Academy was the place where Bob played every Saturday night. He and the band also did live radio broadcasts on KVOO-Tulsa on those Saturdays and every day at noon. They

traveled from there, performing a grueling regular circuit for years and always getting back, sometimes after dawn, to make that noontime radio show. Thus, the 1941 song "Take Me Back to Tulsa" came into being.

Bob wanted every song they did to have a beat that people could dance to. They did fiddle tunes, blues songs, the latest pop tunes and swing numbers. They did sentimental numbers such as "The Waltz You Saved for Me" and "I'll See You in My Dreams," pop hits such as "Corrine Corrina" and "That's What I Like about the South," and novelty tunes such as "Pray for the Lights to Go Out" and "Who Walks in When I Walk Out." This is alongside fiddle tunes Bob wrote or inherited from his family such as "Maiden's Prayer," "Spanish Two Step," and "Silver Bells."

The four best-known tunes, "Take Me Back to Tulsa," "Steel Guitar Rag," "Faded Love," and "San Antonio Rose" show the versatility and freedom Bob wanted to create and allow his band to enjoy. "Take Me Back to Tulsa" is basically a fiddle tune featuring some spectacular breaking of meter, with catchy lyrics and devilishly intricate instrumentation.

"Steel Guitar Rag" was Leon McAuliffe's elaboration on an earlier blues piece called "Guitar Rag." The 1936 recording features a piano solo by Al Stricklin and a heroic saxophone solo by Ray DeGeer.

"Faded Love" became something of a country music standard and showed how, even in a song with positively mournful lyrics, Bob was determined to make the tune danceable.

"San Antonio Rose" started life as a 1938 instrumental version featuring fiddle and steel guitar, something of a reworking of "Spanish Two Step," and then became a huge hit in 1940 after lyrics were added. The song is the Bob Wills tune everybody knows, even if they don't know it came from him. It has been covered by countless artists. The vocal remake has a big band sound, plenty of horns, no fiddle or steel, and a fine vocal by Bob's main singer for many years, the great Tommy Duncan.

Sing it, Tommy...

Wills sang, and his unusually high voice often shocks people the first time they hear it. He sang melody and harmony or provided commentary alongside other vocalists. A lot of his "talking" consisted of lines from medicine show routines he had learned as a young man.

Other band members also sang, especially Leon McAuliffe and Joe Ferguson and, in later years, lead vocalist Leon Rausch, who kept the Wills sound alive both with Bob in the 1950s and '60s and with the reconstituted band after Bob's death.

The quintessential Texas Playboy vocalist, whose work inspired Leon Rausch and countless other vocalists, was Tommy Duncan. He worked with Bob off and on for decades and put his stamp not just on Bob's music but on all of Western Swing and much of the music that grew out of it. If a professional is someone who can make something difficult seem easy, that was certainly true of Tommy Duncan. He sang a remarkable variety of songs with Bob and had an impressive range, both in the sense of having the ability to hit notes purely and in his versatility. Everything he sang had a relaxed sense to it. He was a truly gifted vocalist with a prodigious memory for lyrics.

Dance music had to have a solid rhythmic base, as is illustrated perfectly in the rhythm section's backing of Leon McAuliffe's steel guitar solo after the first verse of "Blue Yodel No. 1" from 1937. William E. "Smoky" Dacus is the drummer, Joe Ferguson is on bass, Herman Arnsperger and C. G. "Sleepy" Johnson are playing acoustic guitars, Al Stricklin is on piano, and Bob's brother Johnnie Lee is on banjo. It's as if they are playing one instrument, the rhythm is so pure. The only thing outside the basic beats is the syncopated right hand work on the piano.

THE COMING OF ELDON SHAMBLIN

Critics, historians, and listeners credit the arrival of Eldon Shamblin as a point of transformation in Bob's music. Shamblin developed an instrumental style that was unique by combining a strong bass note with chord changes on virtually every beat, but his effect on the band's music overall transcended his own playing.

Like most of the Texas Playboys, he was largely self-taught, but he knew a great deal about the charts bands used in live performances and recording sessions. He was also a good teacher who could help other musicians develop the "head" arrangements most relied on to take a song from rehearsal quality to performance. With the exception of the horn players who had to have some help keeping the close harmonies of the "big-band" pieces straight, it is a virtual certainty that no one who ever played with Bob took a piece of sheet music onto a bandstand at one of Bob's dances or shows. Bob demanded constant readiness, for one thing, so each musician would be able to play a solo at a split second's notice. Bob also wanted the musicians in the band to engage the audience, and he knew that was impossible to do while studying a piece of music on a stand.

Eldon was able to teach arrangements to other guys in the band. The result was a smoother, more sophisticated sound that was closer in many ways to the pop music being created by bands in other parts of the country. Listen especially to "Twin Guitar Special."

That is not to say Bob abandoned the styles that helped make his live appearances so much fun. The April 1940 sessions that created two big band-style releases, "New San Antonio Rose" and "Big Beaver," also produced recordings of fiddle tunes "Lone Star Rag," "That Brownskin Gal," and "Blue Bonnet Rag," a medley of "Spanish" waltzes, "Corrine Corrina," and an important song that foreshadowed Bob's post-World War II influences on country music, "Time Changes Everything." Eldon Shamblin's influence was huge, though, as it pointed the way toward the future of Western Swing as a combination of genres and styles that demanded high professionalism. Everybody who ever played with Bob could play with anybody else who ever played with Bob, in part because of the skills Eldon Shamblin helped build into the band, including the ability to remember arrangements and pay attention to the highest standards of musical performance, while remaining constantly ready to improvise as Bob's on-the-spot rearranging might require.

THE POST-WAR SOUND

An increased prominence of guitars in the band makes Bob's World War II and post-war music very interesting. It's different from the pre-war, especially the pre-Eldon, music. For one thing, it was a smaller group, back to the size Bob worked with when he first went to Tulsa or even a little smaller. Fiddles continued to play the dominant role, and Bob had some great fiddlers in this period, including the flashy left-handed fiddler Joe Holley, the very smooth Keith Coleman, and the remarkable Johnny Gimble. Like Shamblin, Gimble was thought of as a musician who made everybody else he played with play better. This was far from the "fiddle band" format Bob started out with, though, in large part because of the prominence of guitars. Eldon Shamblin deserves a lot of the credit for this change, but Bob also hired a remarkable string of other guitarists in the late war years and postwar period.

Before the war was over, he had Cameron Hill and Jimmy Wyble, whose work on "Roly Poly" from January 1945 is very exciting. He had the incomparable Lester Barnard Jr., whose "dirty, low-down" style seemed shocking to some of Bob's fans but whose playing Bob liked a lot. He also had some very talented steel guitarists, Noel Boggs and Herb Remington, to name just two, whose solos and interplay with the "standard" guitarists added greatly to the power of those instruments and the drive they gave Bob's music. But a quick listen to "Brain Cloudy Blues" from 1946 and Junior Barnard's amazing guitar solo will convince anyone that Bob's creativity, willingness to experiment, and determination to drive forward into a bright musical future were all undiminished.

“Brain Cloudy Blues” and other songs from the post-war period were recorded in California, which became Bob’s base of operations for a number of years. He played there, toured from there, and did shows in Las Vegas and elsewhere in the West. He took advantage of the post-war economic boom on the West Coast and the presence of countless fans who knew his music. Many of these people had gone west during the Great Depression or ended up there because of military service or defense work. A lot of them enjoyed going to Bob Wills dances in California, and many heard his music increasingly in stage shows in Las Vegas. He never abandoned dances but increasingly split his time between the dancehall and the concert stage.

THE BOB WILLS LEGACY

Throughout the rest of his career, Bob continued to provide musical performances presented by hard-working, creative musicians who knew that music is more to most people than just entertainment. He knew that music defines a great deal of the human experience, that it provides the soundtrack by which people celebrate milestones, welcome new experiences, relive old ones, and date their memories.

His is a great story, started by a great American artist who was never different simply to be different, but whose willingness to try new things, to embrace creative freedom, and to demand that everybody who ever played for him give everything they had in every performance set him apart from every other musician and bandleader of his age.

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