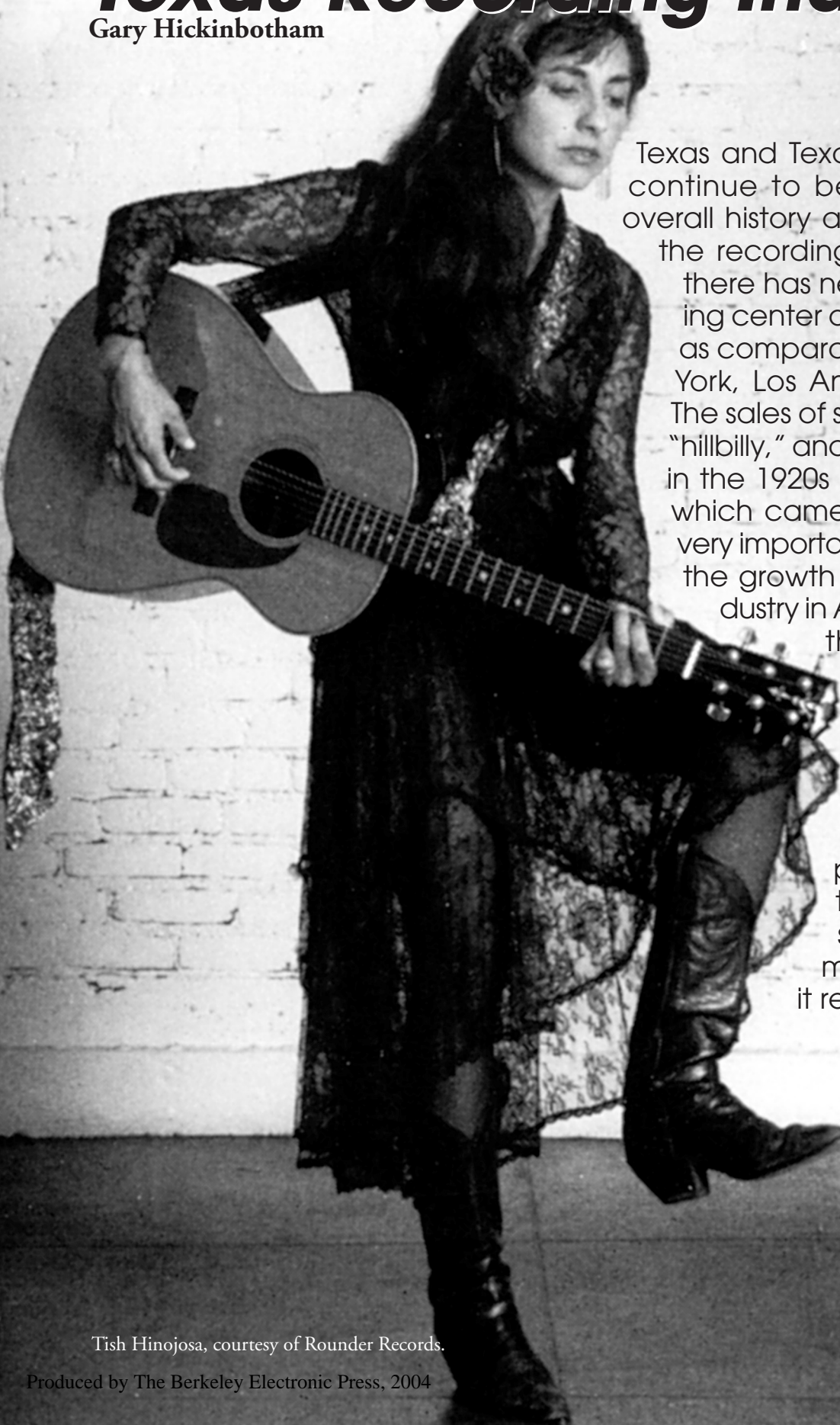


# A History of the Texas Recording Industry <sup>1</sup>

Gary Hickinbotham



Texas and Texans have been and continue to be prominent in the overall history and development of the recording industry, although there has never been a recording center or record label in Texas comparable to those of New York, Los Angeles, or Nashville. The sales of so-called "cowboy," "hillbilly," and "ethnic" recordings in the 1920s and 1930s, much of which came out of Texas, were very important in helping bankroll the growth of the recording industry in America. At the time, the recording companies considered the audience for "popular" music to be "lower-class," but it was certainly a larger and more profitable market than that for classical and operatic music recordings, and it remains so today.

Tish Hinojosa, courtesy of Rounder Records.

The recording industry is an interdependent but not-always-harmonious mix of music, technology, marketing, and ego. A change in each of these elements affects the development of the others. In the earliest days of American recording, the scarcity and expense of the requisite equipment, coupled with the technical knowledge necessary to operate it, limited the market for recordings mostly to the wealthy. As recording technology developed, the audience for recordings expanded to the point in which groups such as the Mexican immigrant communities in South Texas had an average of 118 records for every 100 people by the 1930s.<sup>2</sup>

limited frequency response and caused the recordings to sound scratchy. However, the sheer novelty of listening to recordings created a great public demand and several recording companies soon appeared in order to capitalize on the phonograph's growing popularity. For example, the Columbia Phonograph Company formed in 1889 to market the graphophone system for dictation, but soon found that music sold far better. Columbia produced its first record catalog in 1890, which included a list of Edison and Columbia recordings on cylinders.<sup>8</sup>

One of Edison's star recording artists was Texan Vernon Dalhart (born Marion Try Slaughter II). Dalhart sang operatic and

*The first country music performer to be commercially recorded was born in Arkansas, but grew up, from the age of three, in Texas.*

The constant search for new songs and artists led the competing record labels to Texas because of its broad variety of musical scenes and styles. The popularity of these recordings spread the influence of Texan artists' musical styles across America and throughout the world.

### **Early Recording Pioneers**

Thomas Edison made his first recording on a tinfoil-covered cylinder in 1877.<sup>3</sup> Originally intending only to record telegraph signals, he soon found that he had invented a machine that could record intelligible audio. He then designed a commercial recorder to be used for dictation, but its real value turned out to be making and playing recordings for entertainment.<sup>4</sup> Edison patented the first commercial version of his cylinder recorder in 1887.<sup>5</sup> In 1893, a team of Edison's engineers out on a field trip made the first known recording in Texas, a performance of "Los Pastores," (the shepherds' songs of the Latino Christmas pageant) in a San Antonio hotel.<sup>6</sup>

Piano rolls also were made at that time, and it was on these that one of the earliest recordings of the performances of a Texan was made. Ragtime innovator Scott Joplin made piano rolls of his compositions from 1896 until shortly before his death in 1917.<sup>7</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century, there were three major competing formats for recording audio. None of these was electronic, and each had an associated label, which was in fierce competition with the others. Edison's lateral-groove cylinder system was utilized by Victor Records. Emile Berliner's "Gramophone," on the Brunswick label, used a zinc photo-engraved lateral-cut disk. Charles Tainter's "Graphophone," a vertical-groove cylinder-type recorder, was used by Columbia.

Until the advent of electronic recording in the mid-1920s, most recording systems funneled sound from the musicians into a trumpet-like horn, where the vibrations caused a needle to engrave a groove in a rotating wax-coated cylinder or disk. The mechanical limitations of these acoustically-driven systems severely

popular compositions in New York, recording for Edison around 1915. Edison was constantly improving his cylinder recorder's design, and Dalhart was one of the artists whose recordings

64 THE LADY'S HOME JOURNAL February, 1920

# Columbia Grafonola

GRAND OPERA as presented by such stars as Ponselle, Hackett, Stracciari, Lazaro, Barrientos, Rother, and Mardones exclusively through Columbia Records on the Columbia Grafonola is music at its best.

Scene from "Othello"

COLUMBIA GRAFONOAS Standard Models up to \$1000. Special Designs up to \$2100.

Columbia Graphophone Co., New York  
London Factory: 100 Colindale Road, U.C.

Columbia Grafonola Ad.

introduced the famous “Blue Amberol” cylinder that would last through many playings.<sup>9</sup> Dalhart’s recordings sold well enough, but his greatest success came in 1924, when his career, and Victor Records’ business, were flagging. By various accounts, either Dalhart persuaded Edison or Edison persuaded him to record

Lomax and his son Alan continued conducting field recordings throughout the Southern United States in the 1930s for the Library of Congress Archive of American Folk Song. During one such session, the Lomaxes visited Angola Prison in Louisiana to record the prolific but relatively unknown singer Huddie Led-

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*Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, recording sessions in Texas were held in hotel rooms, churches, office buildings, banquet halls, and at radio stations, including WFAA, WRR, and KLIF in Dallas and WOAI in San Antonio.*

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some “hillbilly” tunes. Dalhart set aside his vocal training and sang, in a nasally twang, a number of the songs he had heard in his youth. One of these recordings, which included “The Wreck of the Old Southern 97” and “The Prisoner’s Song,” became the first million-selling country record in history, reviving Dalhart’s career and providing much-needed revenue for Victor Records. Victor claimed that six million copies of the songs were eventually sold. Dalhart’s hit recording of “Home On the Range” in 1927 established him as the first country music “star.”<sup>10</sup>

The first country music performer to be commercially recorded was born in Arkansas, but grew up, from the age of three, in Texas. Legendary fiddler Alexander “Eck” Robertson of Amarillo went to New York in 1922 and persuaded RCA to record several of his “hillbilly” fiddle tunes, including “Arkansas Traveler” and “Sally Gooden.” These recordings helped establish a national interest in the fiddle band tradition, and their popularity sparked a growing public demand for “hillbilly” music, as well as “cowboy” music.<sup>11</sup>

### **Field Recordings**

What we know as “country” music today was strongly influenced by some of the earliest recordings made in the Lone Star state. Folklorist John A. Lomax, who later co-founded the Texas Folklore Society, traveled throughout the Southwest in the early 1900s making numerous “field” recordings of Texas cowboy songs. He transcribed and then published these in 1910 as *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*. This book sold quite well and helped create a national fascination with cowboy music and folklore.

Lomax had grown up in Texas and, as a teenager, wrote down words to the songs he heard cowboys singing. After college, he secured funding from Harvard University to conduct field research into cowboy music. Ironically, his own alma mater, the University of Texas, was not interested in his study of what it termed “tawdry, cheap, and unworthy” cowboy music and lore. Because mobility was essential, Lomax pioneered a portable recording rig and traveled by car throughout Texas visiting cities, prisons, ranches, and any other location where he could record cowboys and others singing the old songs of the American West. His efforts helped preserve and popularize such now-standard cowboy songs as “Home on the Range,” “The Streets of Laredo,” “Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie,” and “Git Along Little Dogies.”<sup>12</sup>

better. Over the next several years, the Lomaxes made numerous recordings of Ledbetter, better known as Leadbelly, and helped bring his music to the attention of the world.<sup>13</sup>

Though John Lomax is the earliest, most prolific, and best-known Texas folklorist, there certainly were others who recorded regional music throughout Texas. William Owens, from Pin Hook, Texas, traveled with a gramophone-type recorder, which embossed aluminum discs that were played back with needles made of cactus spine. Owens, who had taught at Texas Agricultural & Mechanical College, recorded in East Texas and Louisiana in the mid-1930s for his doctorate from the University of Iowa. That institution was not interested in keeping his collection of recordings. However, the University of Texas was, perhaps recognizing its earlier mistake in not supporting Lomax.

In 1941, J. Frank Dobie hired Owens as a folklorist and the University of Texas acquired his collection. Owens continued to add recordings to the collection into the 1950s.<sup>14</sup> Also recording in Texas in the 1940s for the Library of Congress were John Rosser, Jr., and famous Texan folklorist John Henry Faulk.<sup>15</sup> Another folklorist-recorder was Dallas attorney Hermes Nye. In the 1940s, he recorded and, at times, performed on the radio old Texas songs for national distribution.<sup>16</sup>

Continuing the field recording tradition, Chris Strachwitz of Arhoolie Records came from California to Texas beginning in the 1960s to record local musicians, including Sam “Lightnin” Hopkins. In 1960, Arhoolie made the first recordings of Mance Lipscomb, a 65-year-old Navasota musician who had never been recorded previously. Lipscomb recorded for Arhoolie until just before his death in 1976, influencing countless musicians and becoming famous for his eclectic repertoire, which included gospel, rags, ballads, and Texas-style blues.<sup>17</sup>

In more recent years, popular demand for these archival field recordings has diminished, probably because recordings are no longer a novelty to listeners, and because many more musicians are now able to record themselves. Even Arhoolie Records exists only because it has other sources of income than record and CD sales.<sup>18</sup> However, field recordings still have appeal, as evidenced by singer-songwriter Michelle Shocked, who achieved commercial success and critical acclaim with the release by Cooking Vinyl Records of a cassette recording of her singing off-stage by a campfire at the 1986 Kerrville Folk Festival near Kerrville, Texas.<sup>19</sup>

**“Race” Records**

By the 1920s, record company executives had taken notice of how well “ethnic” recordings were selling, along with “hillbilly” music, so, they began to actively search for new artists and music for their new “race” records. Because there were few real studio facilities outside of New York and Chicago, major record labels at the time, such as Victor, Columbia, Okeh, Brunswick, Vocalion, and American Record Company, sent teams of engineers and equipment around the country to record regional music.<sup>20</sup>

Texas was a regular destination for these recording teams. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, recording sessions in Texas were held in hotel rooms, churches, office buildings, banquet halls, and at radio stations, including WFAA, WRR, and KLIF in Dallas and WOAI in San Antonio. Finding suitable locations at that time was often difficult, because of racial rules at hotels and other commercial locations, and because churches did not always approve of the music being recorded. There was also the chronic problem of finding room to store the twenty or more trunks of equipment and supplies necessary for a remote recording trip.<sup>21</sup>

Recording onto wax-coated cylinders or thick beeswax discs also presented a number of problems, especially in the Texas heat. Often, engineers had to keep the wax on ice before and after recording. When electronic recording began in the mid-to-late 1920s, high temperatures also caused noisy crackling in the carbon microphones used at the time, so, they were often kept on ice along with the wax until just before the recording started. In general, record companies tried, whenever possible, to avoid summer sessions in Texas.<sup>22</sup>

Conditions at these recording sessions certainly were primitive by today’s standards. Musicians usually were in one room, and the equipment and engineers were in another, so, they often could not even see each other. The musicians had to wait quietly with no idea of what was happening until a yellow light came on, signaling “get ready!” When a green light came on, it was time to play, and there was no stopping because of mistakes.<sup>23</sup> Overall, the process of cramming a group of musicians into a room without windows, air conditioning, or adequate means of communicating with sound engineers was far from ideal. In many ways, it reflected the ongoing challenge today’s music professionals still face of trying to achieve technical excellence in recording while establishing the musical “groove” that allows everyone involved to be musically creative.

Artists who recorded at these remote sessions were not always Texans, but the “race” records are notable, because they are an important part of the many recordings done in Texas during this period. Several of the major blues and gospel sessions are listed below. Victor Records and a later subsidiary label, Bluebird, recorded in Dallas and San Antonio almost once a year from 1929 to 1941. Artists recorded in Texas by Victor include:

- Hattie Hyde, Sammy Hill, Jesse ‘Babyface’ Thomas, and Bessie Tucker (Dallas, 1929)
- Jimmie Davis, Eddie and Oscar, Pere Dickenson,

Ramblin’ Thomas, Walter Davis, and Stump Johnson (Dallas, 1932)

- Mississippi Sheiks, Bo Carter, Joe Pullum, and Rob Cooper (San Antonio, 1934)
- Boots and His Buddies (San Antonio, 1936)
- Andy Boy, Walter ‘Cowboy’ Washington, Big Boy Knox, and Ted Mays and His Band (San Antonio, 1937)
- Bo Carter and Frank Tannehill (San Antonio, 1938)
- The Wright Brothers (Dallas, 1941)<sup>24</sup>

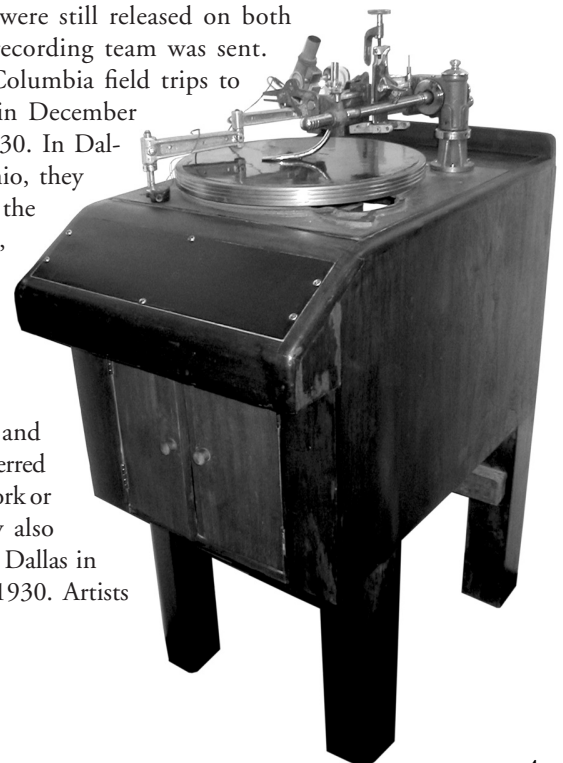
The Atlanta-based Okeh label made its first field trip to Texas in 1925.<sup>25</sup> In Dallas, Okeh recorded Rev. William McKinley Dawkins, though this recording was for Sunshine Gospel Records. In 1928 and 1929, Okeh returned to record “Texas” Alexander, Lonnie Johnson, Troy Floyd and His Plaza Hotel Orchestra, “Little Hat” Jones, Lonesome Charlie Harrison, and Jack Ranger.<sup>26</sup>

Columbia Records came to Dallas in 1927 and 1928 and recorded Washington Phillips, Lillian Glinn, Blind Willie Johnson, Billiken Johnson and Fred Adams, Coley Jones, Willie Tyson, William McCoy, Willie Mae McFarland, Hattie Hudson, Gertrude Perkins, the Dallas String Band, Laura Henton, Le Roy’s Dallas Band, Franchy’s String Band, Blind Texas Marlin, Bobby Cadillac, Mary Taylor, Baby Jean Lovelady, Emma Wright, Rev. J.W. Heads, Willie Reed, Charlie King, the Texas Jubilee Singers, Billiking Johnson and Neal Roberts, Otis Harris, and Jewell Nelson.<sup>27</sup>

In late 1926, Columbia bought Okeh, one of a number of mergers in the recording industry that would continue through the Depression.<sup>28</sup> The two labels continued to send out separate field recording teams until mid-1929. After that, although records were still released on both labels, only one recording team was sent.

The joint Okeh-Columbia field trips to Texas took place in December 1929 and June 1930. In Dallas and San Antonio, they recorded many of the same artists again, completing recordings for the Columbia label before recording for Okeh.<sup>29</sup>

The Brunswick and Vocalion labels preferred to record in New York or Chicago, but they also made field trips to Dallas in 1928, 1929, and 1930. Artists



recorded there include Texas Tommy, Ben Norsingle, Ollie Ross, Hattie Buleson, Eddie and Sugar Lou's Hotel Tyler Orchestra, Bo Jones, Luis Davis, Sammy Price and His Four Quarters, Bert Johnson, Douglas Finnell and His Royal Stompers, Effie Scott, Perry Dixon, Jake Jones, Blind Norris, Gene Campbell, and Coley Dotson. Vocalion also had successful sales with Henry "Texas Ragtime" Thomas of Big Sandy. To help secure its presence in the Southwest, Brunswick later established an office in Dallas.<sup>30</sup>

The American Record Corporation made perhaps the best known and most influential of the race label field recordings in Texas, the Robert Johnson sessions of 1936-37. ARC and its legendary producer Don Law recorded "Texas" Alexander at the first Texas session in San Antonio in April 1934. In September 1934, the team returned to Fort Worth and San Antonio, where they recorded Perry Dixon and Alfoncy Harris. In 1935, they recorded Bernice Edwards, Black Boy Shine, and "Funny Papa" Smith in Fort

Jefferson's acoustic guitar blues style with Charlie Christian's electric guitar style, to Bob Dylan, who recorded a Blind Lemon song, "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean," on his first album. Even the popular 1960s psychedelic band, the Jefferson Airplane, was named after the blues pioneer.<sup>32</sup>

T-Bone Walker made his first recordings in Dallas in 1929 for Columbia, but many of his major recordings in later years were made outside of Texas. In 1929, Columbia recorded Dallas's "Whistlin' Alex Moore, one of the originators of the Texas boogie 'barrelhouse' piano style, at its studio in Chicago. Okeh Records recorded Sippie Wallace (born Beulah Thomas in Houston) in Chicago and on a field trip to St. Louis in 1926, where they also recorded jazz singer Victoria Spivey of Houston for the first time.<sup>33</sup>

Mexican-American border music also proved to have a profitable regional market, so some of the major labels began recording

*Jefferson's music has influenced countless musicians, from the first electric bluesman T-Bone Walker of Dallas, who combined Jefferson's acoustic guitar blues style with Charlie Christian's electric guitar style, to Bob Dylan.*

Worth (which was erroneously printed as "Funny Paper" Smith on the label), Dallas Jamboree Jug Band in Dallas, and J.H. Bragg and His Rhythm Five in San Antonio. In early 1936, Buck Turner (The Black Ace) recorded for ARC in Fort Worth.

In November and December of 1936, at the Gunter Hotel in San Antonio, Mississippi bluesman Robert Johnson recorded 17 of his legendary 29 songs, including "Cross Road Blues," which became both part of his legacy and the foundation for later rock and roll. In June 1937, the remaining 12 songs of Johnson's were recorded at the Brunswick Records Building in Dallas, along with Black Boy Shine. Later that year, ARC recorded Son Becky, Pinetop Burks, Dusky Dailey, Jolly Three, Kitty Gray, and Buddy Woods in San Antonio. In 1938 and 1939, ARC returned to record Kitty Gray, Buddy Woods, and Dusky Dailey. In 1940, ARC recorded the Wright Brothers Gospel Singers at the Burrus Mill Recording Studio in Saginaw, Texas. This studio also was the home base for the Light Crust Doughboys.<sup>31</sup>

Other Texas rhythm and blues "race" musicians left the state to record. Blind Lemon Jefferson, born near Wortham in Freestone County, recorded for Paramount in Chicago from 1925 until 1929. He made his first national hit "Long Lonesome Blues" in 1926 and went on to record over eighty songs for Paramount Records in Chicago and two for Okeh Records in Atlanta. He was the first country blues player to record commercially and was the most popular blues singer of the 1920s until his untimely death in 1929, twelve short years after he began performing with a tin cup at the corner of Elm Street and Central Track in Dallas's Deep Ellum district.

Jefferson's music has influenced countless musicians, from the first electric bluesman T-Bone Walker of Dallas, who combined

Tejano artists. Most of the early recordings of Mexican Americans were done in Los Angeles and Mexico. However, by the late 1920s, some labels had organized recording tours through Texas. They brought in some Tejano artists for sessions in San Antonio, most notably accordionists Bruno Villareal and José Rodríguez, who were both from San Benito. The vocal duet of Pedro Rocha y Lupe Martínez, La Orquesta Típica, and El Cuarteto Carta Blanca were also recorded in the late 1920s. In 1928, the great Lydia Mendoza made her first recording for Okeh Records.<sup>34</sup>

Recordings of Mexican-American music increased in the 1930s, with Tejano artists occupying more of the recording slots at the temporary studios in Texas. One of the Victor/Bluebird San Antonio sessions in 1934 recorded Octavio Mas Montes, Los Hermanos Chavarria, Gaitán y Cantú, Trio Texano, Pedro Rocha y Lupe Martínez, Bruno Villareal, Los Hermanos San Miguel, and Rafael Rodríguez. Also recorded at that session were W. Lee O'Daniel and His Light Crust Doughboys and bluesman Texas Alexander. Lydia Mendoza left Okeh Records and began recording on the Bluebird label in 1934. An extremely popular singer worldwide, Mendoza would record over 200 songs for Bluebird by 1940.<sup>35</sup>

Accordionist Santiago Jiménez, Sr., made his first recordings in San Antonio on the Decca label in 1936. He later switched to Victor, because they paid \$75 per recording, and Decca paid only \$21.<sup>36</sup> Also, in 1936, Narciso Martínez, accompanied by his bajo sexto player Santiago Almeida, of Skidmore, Texas,<sup>37</sup> recorded twenty titles in one session.<sup>38</sup> These recordings on the Bluebird label<sup>39</sup> cemented the use of the bajo sexto, a Mexican double-coursed twelve-string bass guitar, as the preferred rhythm instrument with the accordion, replacing the traditional tambora de rancho, a drum, which drowned out the accordion on recordings.<sup>40</sup>

Narciso Martínez had lived for a while near Corpus Christi among many Bohemians, Czechs, and Germans. He was among the first to blend the European and Mexican accordion styles, along with Camilo Cantú of Central Texas and Santiago Jiménez, who was doing the same in San Antonio. Martínez's recordings for Bluebird began the popularization of the conjunto style and were distributed worldwide. They were well received in many places, except Mexico City, where music from "El Norte" was frowned upon at the time.<sup>41</sup> Sadly, even though he is in the Conjunto Hall of Fame, Camilo Cantú was never recorded, so his music is not available to listeners.<sup>42</sup>

During the 1930s, a clear difference in styles evolved between the border music of California and Texas. The popularity of the recordings from Texas helped to establish the Texan accordion-bajo sexto conjunto as a genre of its own. Contributing to this style was another San Antonio musician, Adolph Hofner, who recorded there for Okeh and Columbia. Hofner was of Czech and German heritage, and his band, Adolph Hofner and the San Antonians, played an eclectic mixture of western swing with Czech and German polkas.<sup>43</sup>

### **Recording, Radio, and Western Swing**

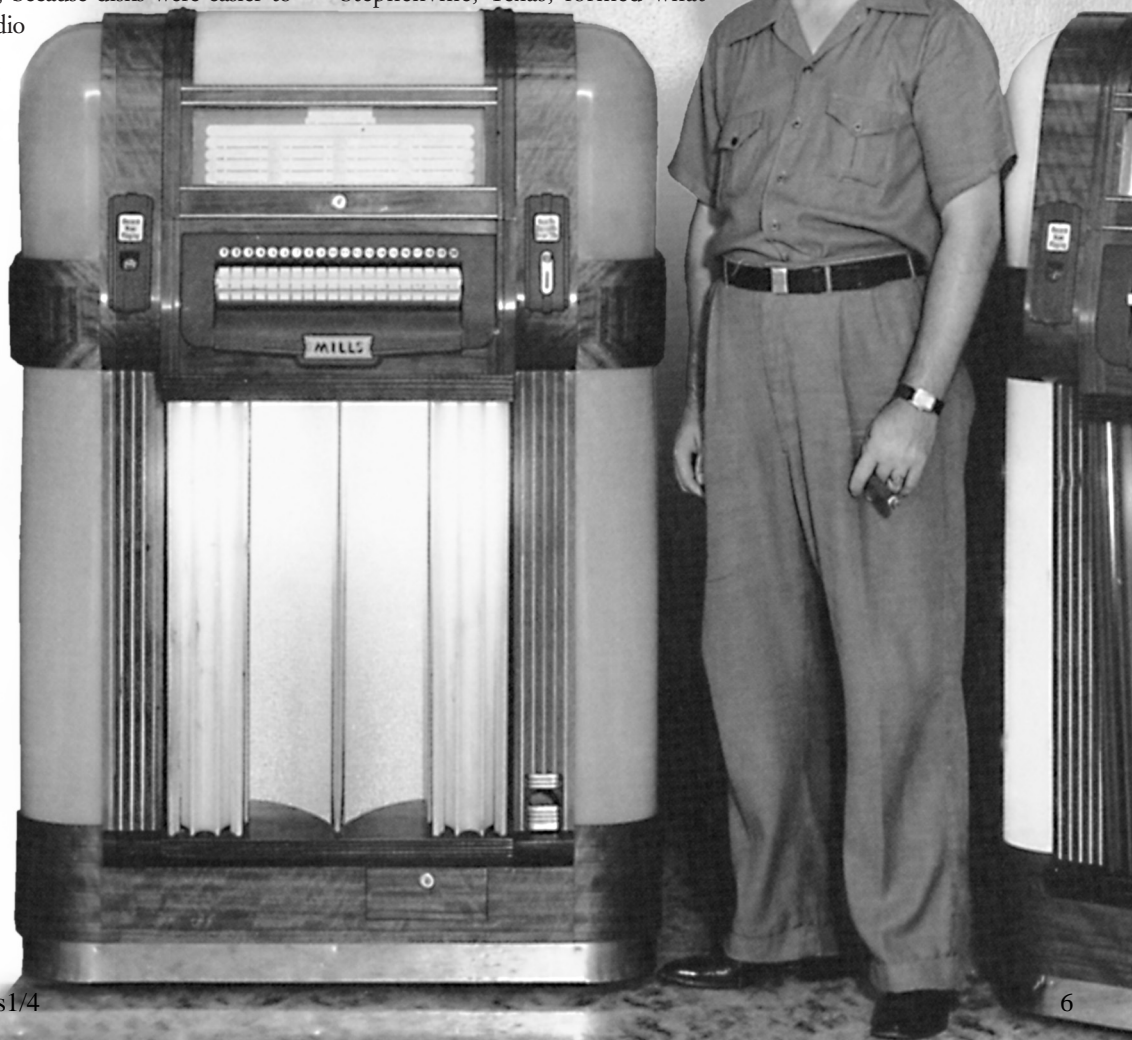
When electronic recording began in 1925, there was some promise for expanding record sales, because disks were easier to replicate than cylinders. However, radio soon appeared, and the expansion of commercial broadcasts put a crimp in the growth of record sales in the early-to-mid 1920s.<sup>44</sup> Radio was free, while records were expensive, and the marketing relationship between radio and the record industry had not yet developed. Much of the recording in the 1920s was done at radio stations, such as WOAI in San Antonio and WFAA in Dallas, where musicians would perform and be recorded on transcription disks for later broadcast.

Transcription recording equipment was expensive, usually found only at the larger radio stations, and was not in a consumer-friendly format, although some wealthier Americans owned radios with built-in disk recorders. The large transcription disks could be played only a few times, so copies of these are extremely noisy, but a few survive.<sup>45</sup> The Great Depression, which began in 1929, further reduced the demand for records, which sold for about 75 cents, a

fair amount of money in those days. However, the increasing use of jukeboxes created a market for records, and the major labels that survived the Depression saw their markets expand in the 1930s, though prices of 78-rpm records had dropped to about 35 cents each.<sup>46</sup>

W. Lee O'Daniel's Light Crust Doughboys, a "hillbilly" precursor of "western swing" bands, was one of the first bands to exploit and be exploited by the powerful mix of radio and recording that began in the late 1920s. The popularity of their radio show on WBAP (Fort Worth) led to the creation of one of the first radio networks in America, the Texas Quality Network. Eventually, the Light Crust Doughboys gained enough of a following to warrant their own recording studio in Saginaw, Texas. Though personnel in the band would change, the Light Crust Doughboys continued to record through the end of the twentieth century. W. Lee "Pappy" O'Daniel, who managed the group, capitalized on the fame his band brought him by becoming governor of Texas and later a United States Senator.<sup>47</sup>

Several members of the Light Crust Doughboys had an enormous impact on Texas music and recording after they left the band. Milton Brown of Stephenville, Texas, formed what



is generally recognized as the first Western Swing band, Milton Brown and His Musical Brownies, in 1932. Brown made over 100 recordings for Victor and Decca before his death from complications following a car wreck in 1936.<sup>48</sup> The Musical Brownies was the first band to record an amplified steel guitar, played by Bob Dunn, bringing a sound to country music that is standard today.<sup>49</sup> Brown's blend of white "hillbilly" (Appalachian square dance) music with blues, jazz, polka, and Mexican musical influences eventually came to be known as "western swing."

Bob Wills of Kosse, Texas, became, by far, the most famous pioneer of western swing. Wills left the Doughboys in 1933 and formed the Texas Playboys, the most popular of the western swing bands, often incorporating a horn section and performing a variety of musical styles. Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys made their first recording in 1935 for American Record Company's other famous producer, Art Satherly.<sup>50</sup> This session also was the first time drums were recorded in country music.<sup>51</sup> Also famous in his own right was Marvin "Smokey" Montgomery, a long-time member of the Doughboys, who became a successful record producer and studio owner in the decades after World War II.<sup>52</sup>

fee per recording, and were not compensated when their records were sold, played on jukeboxes, or broadcast on radio.<sup>55</sup>

By 1943, through an agreement with the AFM, this stoppage caused the U.S. Army to produce its own records, called "V-discs," (Victory) for the morale and entertainment of American soldiers. Texan jazz musicians Jack Teagarden and Oran "Hot Lips" Page recorded on V-discs, as did Bill Boyd, Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys, and Tex Ritter. From 1943 until 1949, over eight million of these vinyl 12" records were manufactured. Most of the V-discs were destroyed after the war in keeping with the agreement made with the AFM.<sup>56</sup>

Following the end of World War II, the American recording industry continued growing and changing, as innovations in materials and electronics developed during the war were adapted to commercial recording. Once again, Texas played a large role in artistic, technical, and commercial aspects of the recording industry. Technology derived from anti-submarine acoustic listening equipment was adapted to audio recording and record production.<sup>57</sup> The development of the first working transistor by Texas Instruments in 1954<sup>58</sup> further improved electronic designs,

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*The U.S. Army produced its own records, called "V-discs," (Victory) for the morale and entertainment of American soldiers.*

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Bill Boyd's Cowboy Ramblers was another top western swing group of the 1930s, recording the popular "Under the Double Eagle." Boyd, from Ladonia, Texas, first recorded his band for Bluebird Records in San Antonio in 1934, with a style and instrumentation that was more traditional than Wills's. The Cowboy Ramblers were also different in that they performed mostly in the recording studio and on the radio, rarely ever touring. They recorded over 200 songs for RCA-Bluebird and appeared in six Hollywood films in the 1940s.<sup>53</sup>

In 1939, the Houston dance band Cliff Bruner and His Boys recorded "Truck Driver's Blues," written by East Texas musician Ted Daffan, a steel and electric guitar pioneer, and sung by Aubrey "Moon" Mullican, from Corrigan, Texas. The record was a big hit for the Decca label and was the first song to help popularize the "big-rig truck-drivin'" genre of country music.<sup>54</sup>

#### ***World War II, the Post-War Era, and the Rise of Texas Record Labels and Recording Studios***

When World War II began, commercial recording in the United States slowed dramatically. The shellac used for disks was needed for the war effort, as was the beeswax used for the master recordings. In addition, the general strike ordered by James Petrillo, president of the American Federation of Musicians, in 1942 hampered recording for two full years. The strike was called to seek royalties from the record companies for a fund to compensate musicians who lost work because of competition from recorded music. Until the strike, musicians were only paid a flat

allowing higher fidelity with lower noise levels than vacuum tube circuitry, along with reduced size and heat levels.

Although immediately after the war, smaller labels often manufactured new records by melting down old ones, advances in plastics ended the use of shellac and led to disks that could have grooves much closer together, allowing longer playing times and eventually slower rotation speeds. Masters were no longer recorded on wax, but rather on magnetic tape, a new medium developed from captured German tape recorders. A reviving American economy and a baby boom also were helping create a growing audience for recorded music.

By the 1950s, broadcast television began to have as much of an impact on the recording industry as radio had in the 1920s and 1930s, when Hollywood first began promoting the "singing cowboy." The introduction of the 12" "LP" format further expanded the market. After the war, the large record companies did not resume their field recording trips. Instead, they were making large profits from national hits recorded at their studios, so, they decided the extra expense of location recording did not justify the return from sales in regional markets.<sup>59</sup>

The postwar withdrawal of major labels from regional markets actually opened the door for the growth of the Texas recording industry, since it led to the establishment of several small, independent labels that rushed to fill the void left by the larger companies. The cessation of location recording by the larger labels also created a need for recording facilities in Texas. Many G.I.s returned from the war with electronic skills, which they put to

use by building recording studios.

In the late 1940s, studios and record manufacturing plants were built in Dallas, Houston, San Antonio, and even Alice and McAllen by entrepreneurial engineers and businessmen. The lack of commercially manufactured professional-grade audio recording equipment meant many studio engineers had to design and fabricate their own microphone preamplifiers and mixing consoles until the 1970s, when designers such as Englishman Rupert Neve began producing high quality manufactured equipment. Neve, widely regarded in the professional audio industry as its foremost designer, currently resides in Wimberley, Texas.<sup>60</sup>

### *The Recording Industry in Houston and East Texas*

One of the premier Texas studios of the post-World War II period, ACA Studios, was built in Houston in 1948 by Bill Holford, Sr., after he left the military, where he was a radio and sound reinforcement technician. ACA (Audio Company of America) had its own label, ACA Records, but many other regional Texas labels also hired Holford to help build their own studios. These smaller labels included Peacock, Bellaire, "D" Records, Starday, and even the diminutive but no less significant Sarg Records of Luling, Texas, which produced the first recordings of KBOP disc jockey Willie Nelson and San Antonio child prodigy Doug Sahm. Known for the quality of his recordings, Holford was well liked and respected by artists, such as B.B. King, Sonny Boy Williamson, Lightnin' Hopkins, Johnny Winter, Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown, Johnny Copeland, T-Bone Walker, Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton, Little Richard, and many other famous musicians who enjoyed recording at his studio.<sup>61</sup>

Houston producer, label owner, and songwriter Don Robey became one of the most important figures in Texas pop, jazz, gospel, and R&B music. In 1949, Robey, a nightclub owner, was managing Gatemouth Brown, of Orange, Texas. In order to get Brown recorded, Robey started his own label, Peacock Records. The first successful black-owned record label, Peacock had hits by Gatemouth Brown, Big Mama Thornton, Floyd Dixon, Memphis Slim, and Marie Adams. Peacock also released progressive jazz recordings by Betty Carter and Sonny Criss.

Robey bought the Duke label of Memphis, Tennessee, in 1952, adding Bobby Blue Bland, Roscoe Gordon, "Junior" Parker, and Johnny Ace to his roster of artists. In 1957, Robey started the Back

Beat label and had hits by O.V. Wright, Joe Hinton, and even country-rocker Roy Head of San Marcos. Robey built Peacock Studios in Houston in 1958. He added gospel artists to his R&B roster, including the Hummingbirds, who had a minor national hit with "Loves Me Like A Rock" and would later back Paul Simon on his recording of the song. Robey sold Duke-Peacock Records to ABC-Dunhill in 1973.<sup>62</sup>

Houston became a major center of rhythm and blues and zydeco in the 1950s and 1960s, giving rise to a number of record labels, studios, and record manufacturing plants. Bill Quinn built Gold Star Studio there, where East Texas musician Harry Choates recorded his famous arrangement of "Jolie Blonde" ("Jolie Blon") for Gold Star Records in 1946. "Moon" Mullican's version of Choates's song on King Records a year later took the nation by storm. Quinn had started Gold Star to record country singers, but the label became known for its blues artists. In the 1950s, J.P. "The Big Bopper" Richardson recorded "Chantilly Lace" there, and Johnny Preston recorded his hit "Running Bear." Lightnin' Hopkins recorded his first songs at Gold Star. He would often stop in to record a song or two, sometimes written on the spot, when he needed cash. Gold Star was one of twenty labels on which Hopkins recorded. "Thunder" Smith, Little Son Jackson, and Smoky Hogg also recorded at Gold Star.<sup>63</sup>

H.W. "Pappy" Daily of Houston bought Bill Quinn's Choates masters in 1955 and released them on his independent "D" Records label. "D" Records helped start the commercial careers of the Big Bopper, George Jones, Willie Nelson, and George Strait and the Ace in the Hole Band. It ceased operations in 1975, but started up again in 2002. Daily's larger Starday label, created in 1952, was distributed by Mercury and is best known for releasing George Jones's first recordings. Daily sold Starday in 1957, and the label moved to Nashville.<sup>64</sup>

Quinn's Gold Star Studio eventually became Sugar Hill Studio in 1971, purchased by legendary producer Huey Meaux, who had earlier used it for his Crazy Cajun, Jetstream, Pacemaker, and other labels. Gold Star would host many noted artists over the years, some not on Meaux's labels, including Archie Bell and the Drells, Barbara Lynn, Clay Walker, the Who, B.J. Thomas, Sunny (Sonny Ozuna) and the Sunliners (the first all Mexican-American band to appear on American Bandstand), Roy Head, the Sir Douglas Quintet with Doug Sahm and Augie Meyers, Freddy Fender, who had a hit with "Before the Next Teardrop Falls," Janis Joplin, Smash Mouth, Destiny's

Courtesy of the Pappy Daily Collection, Southwestern Writers Collection, Texas State University-San Marcos



Child, and even the Rolling Stones. Tejano star Selena recorded her first album at Gold Star in 1983 for Freddie Records.<sup>65</sup>

International Artist also was a Houston label of the 1960s. It was run by Houstonian Kenny Rogers's brother Lelan Rogers and recorded early psychedelic bands at Andrus Studios, which had the Cinema record label. Most notable of these were Austin's Roky Erickson and the 13th Floor Elevators, Bubble Puppy, and Gold Rush. Other Houston labels of the time included Steffek Records and Tantara records. Tantara released recordings by The Moving Sidewalks, who later became ZZ Top.<sup>66</sup> The psychedelic genre provided a contrast to the country music scene in Houston, which centered on Mickey Gilley's Jones Recording Studio in North Houston, and later, Gilley's night club in Pasadena. Gilley

sold 2-1/2 million copies in two months, launching Frizzell's career.<sup>75</sup> Also recording at Jim Beck's studio were George Jones, Ray Price, Floyd Tillman, and Marty Robbins. Beck was very influential with the major labels, and, if not for his untimely death in 1958, Dallas might have gained a comparable stature with Nashville as a country music recording center.<sup>76</sup>

In nearby Fort Worth, producer "Major Bill" Smith's Josie Records label released several national hits in the 1960s, including Bruce Channel's hit "Hey, Baby," Delbert McClinton and the Rondels' "If You Really Want Me To, I'll Go," Paul & Paula's "Hey Paula," and J. Frank Wilson and the Cavaliers' "Last Kiss."<sup>77</sup> Marvin "Smokey" Montgomery, of the Light Crust Doughboys, who produced "Hey, Baby" and "Hey, Paula," built the world-famous

## Country artists continued to record in Dallas, along with some rockabilly pio-

and Bert Frilot built a new studio next to the club, where part of the soundtrack to the film "Urban Cowboy" was produced.<sup>67</sup>

Tyler, Texas, also has a colorful recording history. Studio recording there began in the 1960s, with facilities, such as Robin Hood Brian's Recording Studio, where ZZ Top, John Fred & His Playboy Band, David Houston, The Uniques, The Five Americans, Southwest FOB (later England Dan & John Ford Coley), Mouse & the Traps, Jon & Robin, and Gladstone, along with hundreds of other regional acts, recorded for such larger labels as Epic and Paula and smaller local labels Ty-Tex and Custom. LeAnne Rimes recorded many songs, including her Grammy-winning "Blue," at Rosewood Studio in Tyler.<sup>68</sup> Starting with only a handful of studios after the war, there are now more than 200 registered recording studios in Houston and East Texas.<sup>69</sup>

### **Dallas and Fort Worth**

Dallas also had its share of the recording business in the post-war period. While there was still musical activity in Deep Ellum, much of the R&B recording of the time was done in Houston. However, some small musician-owned labels were established in the Dallas area, including Timothy McNeally's Shawn label and Roger Boykin's SoulTex label. Country artists also continued to record in Dallas, along with some rockabilly pioneers. For example, Bill Boyd recorded at Jack Sellers Studios during the 1950s,<sup>70</sup> where Eck Robertson attempted to resurrect his recording career in the 1940s.<sup>71</sup> Rockabilly artists Gene Summers, Johnny Carroll of Cleburne, Gene Vincent of "Be-Bop-A-Lula" fame (the "Lost Dallas Sessions"),<sup>72</sup> Dallas's rockabilly pioneer "Groovey" Joe Poovey (later "Johnny Dallas"),<sup>73</sup> and Bob Kelly, who also owned Top Ten Studios in Dallas, all recorded at Sellers Studio.<sup>74</sup>

Dallas studio owner Jim Beck discovered and helped promote Lefty Frizzell. Beck, who recorded the singer from Corsicana in 1950, took the recordings to his friend Don Law, then with Columbia Records. Law came to Texas and recorded Frizzell singing "If You've Got The Money, I've Got The Time" which

Sumet Studios in Dallas. Montgomery produced and recorded albums by the Doughboys and many other Texas bands there for decades. Still in operation today, Sumet Studios has hosted many famous musicians from all over the world, including Helen Reddy, who recorded "I Am Woman" there in 1971.<sup>78</sup>

In 1974, engineers Glen Pace and Phil York built Autumn Sound, the first 24-track recording studio in Texas. Within a month of its opening, Willie Nelson recorded "Red-Headed Stranger" there. Nelson's first #1 hit as a singer, "Blue Eyes Crying In The Rain," was on that Grammy-winning album, and he went on to record three more platinum albums at Autumn Sound. Today the studio is called Audio Dallas.<sup>79</sup> Dallas Sound Labs hosted Stevie Ray Vaughan in the 1980s and is still open today as both a studio and a recording school. Planet Dallas, Palmyra Studios, Indian Trail, and Deep Ellum Studios are among the two hundred or more studios that have continued the Dallas-Fort Worth and North Central Texas recording tradition into the twenty-first century.<sup>80</sup>

### **West Texas and Early Rock and Roll**

In West Texas during the 1950s, a new musical style was emerging that would take the world by storm. Buddy Holly and the Crickets and Buddy Knox and the Rhythm Orchids, with Jimmy Bowen, recorded their first hit songs in 1957 at Norman Petty's studio in Clovis, New Mexico, just across the state line. The songs Holly and the Crickets recorded there, including "That'll Be The Day," were released on the Brunswick and Coral labels. Roy Orbison also recorded in Petty's studio, as did Jimmy Gilmer and the Fireballs.<sup>81</sup> There were also some small studios in West Texas, such as Bobby Peeble's Venture Recording Studio in Lubbock, where Holly recorded once in 1956,<sup>82</sup> and Nesman Recording Studio in Wichita Falls,<sup>83</sup> where Buddy recorded the acetates that led to his short-lived contract with Decca.

Tommy Allsup, who had played lead guitar for Holly, built a studio in Odessa in the 1960s.<sup>84</sup> Long-time Lubbock saxophon-

ist and four-track studio owner Don Caldwell, with the help of Lubbock banker-musician Lloyd Llove, built a multi-track studio where Texas artists, including the second-generation Maines Brothers, Joe Ely, Delbert McClinton, Butch Hancock, Terry Allen, and many other artists recorded and continue to record. Norm Petty required long-term contracts from his artists, and was known for sometimes keeping their royalties, so Caldwell's studio and Telephone Records label, which often allowed artists on the label to retain ownership of their material, was popular for many years, and the studio still operates today.<sup>85</sup> In El Paso, Bobby Fuller built a studio in 1962 and released on his own Exeter label the first recording of "I Fought The Law," which he would later re-record in Los Angeles.<sup>86</sup> In West Texas and The Panhandle today there are at least four dozen studios.<sup>87</sup>

### *South Texas and San Antonio*

In South Texas, independent labels quickly appeared in order to record the music of Mexican-American artists who had been abandoned by the major labels. In Alice, jukebox business owner Armando Marroquín was frustrated with the postwar lack of Tejano records from American labels. To supply his jukeboxes, Marroquín started Ideal Records at his home in 1946 and would be the first Mexican American to produce a conjunto record in

the United States. For his debut records to be released as mass-produced 78s, he recorded his wife Carmen, who sang with her sister Laura as Carmen y Laura. Paco Betancourt, a record distributor from San Benito, partnered with Marroquín later that year, and they moved the studio to a building in Alice, where hundreds of recordings by artists, such as Narciso Martínez, Chelo Silva, Beto Villa's Orchestra, Valerio Longoria, Carmen y Laura, Juan López, Maya y Cantú of Nuevo Laredo, Paulino Bernal, Johnny Herrera, and Linda Escobar would be made over the next decade.<sup>88, 89</sup>

During this time, Narciso Martínez made recordings adding vocal duets to the accordion conjunto, helping influence yet another musical style known as *norteño*.<sup>90</sup> When a Mexican bolero singer, Maria Victoria, recorded one of Johnny Herrera's songs for RCA Victor, and the song became popular throughout Mexico, the long-standing resistance in that country against music from "El Norte" began to break down. Eventually a strong market for Texas music developed south of the border.<sup>91</sup>

Ideal also recorded such "corrido" singers as Jesus Maya and Timoteo Cantú, reviving an old tradition of singing ballads about current events and politics, which had gone dormant in the 1940s with the demise of the major labels' field trips.<sup>92</sup> The partnership of Marroquín and Bentancourt ended amicably in 1959, with Mar-



Huey Meaux (right) with Cajon singer Tommy McLain, courtesy of Joe Nick Patoski Papers, Southwestern Writers Collection, Texas State University-San Marcos.

roquín starting Nopal Records in Alice, and Betancourt moving Ideal to San Benito. Ideal opened a new studio and record pressing plant in San Benito, where one of the label's singers, Baldemar Huerta, also helped engineer. Huerta, who recorded regional music at the time along with Spanish translations of American pop tunes, went on to a very successful recording career under the stage name of Freddy Fender.<sup>93</sup>

Arnaldo Ramírez founded Falcon Records in McAllen in 1948. With several subsidiary labels, including Bronco, ARV, Impacto, El Pato, and Bego, it became the largest of the conjunto labels. Many artists who recorded for Ideal recorded for Falcon, whose roster included Los Alegres de Terán, Chelo Silva, Las Norteñas, Lydia Mendoza, Duetto Estrella, Steve Jordan, and the female duets of Hermanas Degollado, Rosita y Aurelia, Hermanas Cantú, Hermanas Mendoza, Hermanas Segovia, and Las Dos Marias. Musicians from Nuevo Leon, Mexico, also recorded for Falcon and Ideal as the cross-border exchange of musical styles increased.<sup>94</sup>

In 1949, Reymundo Treviño founded Arco Records in Alice, a short-lived label on which Tony de la Rosa made his first recording.<sup>95</sup>

In San Antonio, Manuel Rangel, Sr., with a recording of Valerio Longoria, started the Corona label in 1948. He was soon followed by Hymie Wolf, who founded Rio Records. Rio had a relatively brief life span, but it recorded many established artists of the period, including Pedro Rocha, Jesús Casiano, another pioneer conjunto accordionist, Juan Gaytan, Frank Cantú, Manuel Valdez, and Lydia Mendoza's sisters, Juanita and Maria. Other new artists who achieved great popularity made some of their first recordings on Rio, including Fred Zimmerle, Valerio Longoria, Tony de la Rosa, Leandro Guerrero, Felix Borrayo, Frank Corrales, Los Pavos Reales, Pedro Ibarra, Los Tres Diamantes, Los Chavalitos, Conjunto Topo Chico, Conjunto San Antonio Alegre, a Lower Valley accordionist named Armando Almendarez, who played in the Louisiana Zydeco style of Clifton Chenier, Alonzo and his Rancheros, and ranchera singer Ada García. Also making his debut on Rio in 1956 was Santiago Jiménez, Sr.'s son, Leonardo, better known today as the great "Flaco" Jiménez, who has recorded on many major labels.<sup>96</sup> Flaco's younger brother, Santiago, Jr., continues their father's musical tradition on Chief Records, which he founded in 1990.<sup>97</sup> Other San Antonio Tejano labels included Discos Grande, Lira, and Magda.<sup>98</sup>

Of course, there also were non-Hispanic record labels in the San Antonio area following World War II. For example, the Texas Top Hands owned Everstate Records, which was a small country label in the late 1940s and early 1950s.<sup>99</sup> San Antonio disc jockey Joe Anthony's R&B label, Harlem/Ebony, Abe Epstein's Cobra Records, Jesse Schneider's Renner Records, and Bob Tanner's TNT (Tanner 'N Texas) Records, which also had a studio and a record manufacturing plant in the city, were important local labels. Harlem's co-owner, E.J. Henke, also had the Satin, Warrior, and Wildcat labels.<sup>100</sup> Some other early studios in San Antonio were Jeff Smith's Texas Sound Studios, Abe Epstein Studio, and Eddie Morris's Studio. KENS Radio/TV studio also was used to

record music, including Adolph Hofner's work for Sarg Records in 1958.<sup>101</sup> Blue Cat Studio opened in the late 1970s,<sup>102</sup> and, in the early 1980s, Augie Meyers and his son Clay built CAM Studios, which operated until 2003.<sup>103</sup> There are at least six dozen studios still operating in the San Antonio area.<sup>104</sup>

By the 1960s a new generation of Tejano artists was emerging, alongside the larger Chicano movement, and new labels were created to record their music. Roberto Pulido, with Los Clasicos, debuted on the Lago label.<sup>105</sup> San Antonio's Sonny Ozuna, who blended Tejano with American pop as Sunny and the Sunliners, recorded on Joey Records,<sup>106</sup> and band mate Manny Guerra started his GC and Mr. G labels and built Amen Studios, which is still in operation.<sup>107</sup>

In Corpus Christi, Freddy Martinez, Sr., started Freddie Records in order to release his own recordings. Still in business today, the label added such artists as Tony de la Rosa, Ramón Ayala, Little Joe y La Familia, and Jaime De Anda y Los Chamacos, among others, and owns the Legends Studio.<sup>108</sup> Hacienda Records, also of Corpus Christi, recorded the famous Los Hermanos Ayala, and later, Linda Escobar, La Tropa F, Mingo Saldívar, David Lee Garza, and accordionist Eva Ybarra. New artists include Victoria Galvan and Albert Zamora. Hacienda Records also built the first 24-track recording studio in South Texas in the late 1970s and is still a major South Texas studio.<sup>109</sup> In Corpus Christi and the Valley today, there are at least two dozen studios.<sup>110</sup>

### *Austin and Central Texas*

Austin in the late 1950s had the local label Domino Records, which released records by George Underwood, Clarence Smith (later Sonny Rhodes) and the Daylighters, blues steel guitarist Sonny Rhodes, Ray Campi, the Slades, and Joyce Harris. However, Domino shut down in the early 1960s,<sup>111</sup> leaving a few other smaller labels including jazz/funk keyboardist James Polk's Twink Records<sup>112</sup> and Bill Josey's Sonobeat Records. Sonobeat built a small studio and made records released on other labels by Johnny Winter, Ray Campi, the Lavender Hill Express, James Polk, and others until it closed in the early 1970s.<sup>113</sup> Sarg Records used Roy Poole's Austin Custom Recording Studio for several of its records in the 1960s.<sup>114</sup> These labels faded away just as Texas saw the emergence of its own blend of folk, rock, and country musical styles variously called "alternative country," "progressive country," and "Redneck Rock."

In the early 1970s, a vibrant progressive country music scene began to emerge in Austin, and the city's reputation for alternative country truly caught on when Willie Nelson moved back to his home state of Texas from Nashville. Willie, Waylon Jennings, Jerry Jeff Walker, Caroline Hester, Steve Fromholz, B. W. Stevenson, and Ray Benson were joined by a new generation of progressive folk/country/rock musicians, including Ray Wylie Hubbard, Alvin Crow, Michael Martin Murphy, Joe Ely, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Butch Hancock, Rusty Weir, Gary P. Nunn, Walter Hyatt, Champ Hood, and David Ball of Uncle Walt's Band, and Junior Brown. These were followed by Stephen Doster, Nanci Griffith, Lyle Lovett, and Robert Earl Keen, to name just a few.



music, recording and computer recording software industries remains to be seen. ■

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