


Rosson: Texas Music Museum

# ***The Texas Music Museum***

Chester Rosson



*Many Texas music fans who have wished that Texas had its own music museum—as a number of other states do—might be surprised to learn that a museum devoted exclusively to Texas musicians, singers, songwriters, composers, and instrument builders already exists in Austin, just a few blocks east of the state Capitol building. In fact, the Texas Music Museum, a non-profit organization founded in 1984 by University of Texas professor Clayton Shorkey and a band of devoted volunteers, will be celebrating its twentieth anniversary this year. The Texas Music Museum is housed on the first floor of the Marvin C. Griffin Building at 1109 E. 11<sup>th</sup> Street in Austin, where it continues to present exhibits on various aspects of Texas music history.*



From the start, the Texas Music Museum (TMM) built its collection genre by genre, examining through its exhibits Texas blues and jazz, Texas country and classical, accumulating examples of artists' recorded output, photographs, sheet music, and recordings, and supporting historical and biographical background material. In the course of researching and collecting, museum volunteers have solicited and received the help of all the major ethnic communities in the state, as well as hundreds of individual musicians.

Recently, for example, an exhibit focused on the contributions of black women in Texas music, ranging from such early blues and gospel singers as Arizona Dranes and Hociel Thomas, to such jazz artists as Bobbi Humphrey and Ernestine Anderson, to contemporary pop performer Erykah Badu. TMM also honored the seasoned musicians who have entertained Austin residents and tourists for decades in the city's venues. In return, Austin's African-American community responded generously. In late July 2003, the exhibit's run culminated in a musical program of living legends at nearby Ebenezer Baptist Church, where the 1950s gospel group, the Chariettes, reunited to demonstrate their unique brand of righteous praise to an appreciative audience.

Other highlights of this event included longtime educator-performer (and TMM board member) Dr. Beulah Agnes Curry Jones's rendition of Gershwin's "Summertime," jazz singers Hope Morgan and Pam Hart's improvisations on old standards, and Donna Hightower's unforgettable a cappella version of "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child." On the secular side of the program, pianist-singer Ernie Mae Miller, who has played regularly for decades in the lounges of Austin's nicer hotels, delighted the audience with an earthy version of "I'm a Woman," and the flamboyant Miss Lavelle White sang several songs from her long-awaited new CD.

Another recent exhibit featured Texas cowboys and cowgirls—"Black, White, and Vaquero"—who created the songs and styles that led the way to Western music. The show went beyond the well-known "singing cowboys and cowgirls" of Hollywood fame—Tex Ritter, Gene Autry, and Dale Evans—to include performers whose contributions are all but forgotten today, such as Louise Massey and the Westerners and Red River Dave McEnery, whose "Amelia Earhart's Last Flight" memorialized the famous aviatrix and brought the late San Antonian fleeting fame. Also honored were the early collectors and arrangers of cowboy folk material that has entered the national heritage—song collectors, such as John Lomax and his son Alan, as well as composer David Guion, whose versions of "Old Paint" and "Home on the Range" popularized those treasures of musical Texana. On September 14, 2003, the museum presented a roster of cowboy and cowgirl musicians and poets who recreated the sounds of cowboys and their music on the open range.

Currently the TMM's gallery is devoted to the reprise of a ground-breaking exhibit on the music of Native Americans in Texas. This exhibit highlights the role of music among the various tribes that occupied the state at the time of the early Spanish explorers and throughout the period of conflict with Anglo settlers that led to the expulsion of all but a few groups, to the revival of old music forms in the popular Indian powwows of today.





has resulted in exhibits and performances devoted not just to the great national stars, but also to the “roots” music of African, Mexican, Anglo, German, and Czech Texans. Besides numerous shows on blues, jazz, and gospel musicians, attention has been given to the creators of corridos (ballads) of South Texas, the musicians of popular orquestas and conjuntos of San Antonio, Corpus Christi, and the Valley, as well as to the great Tejana and crossover artists, such as Selena and Vikki Carr, who gained international renown. In 1987, the Tejana legends Lydia Mendoza and Rita Vidaurri came out of retirement to perform with singer-songwriter Tish Hinojosa at a TMM concert in the Capitol Rotunda.

Other ethnic communities have also worked with the TMM to support the recognition of their musical heritage. In 1992, the TMM sponsored a Ger-

Such programs are typical of the museum’s efforts to bring historical material to life through exhibits and performances that both educate and entertain. Incidentally, these programs have also been known to help revive the careers of long-retired musicians. This was the case with Austin barrelhouse pianist Roosevelt Williams, known as “Grey Ghost,” who was honored in an exhibit in 1986 and was persuaded by late TMM board member Tary Owens to perform at a Texas Music Museum concert. The following year, legendary “Piano Professors” Alex Moore and Lavada Durst joined Grey Ghost to perform in TMM’s “Evening of Texas Barrelhouse Blues Piano.” These appearances led to a regular engagement for Grey Ghost at Austin’s Continental Club, lasting nearly the remainder of the beloved pianist’s life, and resulted in additional CD recordings for Grey Ghost.

Diversity has been the watchword at the Texas Music Museum, where research into the musical forms of all major ethnic groups



man “Musikfest” held at the Elisabet Ney Museum in Austin. The Austin Saengerrunde, a German men’s choir, sang, and the Boerne Village Band, the oldest German brass band outside of Europe, performed traditional marches, waltzes, and polkas. For a concert in conjunction with TMM’s “Muzicky, Muzicky” Czech exhibit, Kovanda’s Czech Band played traditional songs, and Ray Krenek shared music of a Texas Czech lifetime played on the hammer dulcimer that his grandfather had built after he immigrated from the former Austro-Hungarian Empire in the 1870s. Both exhibits subsequently traveled to museums and libraries across the state.

In recent years, the TMM has mounted several exhibits that were



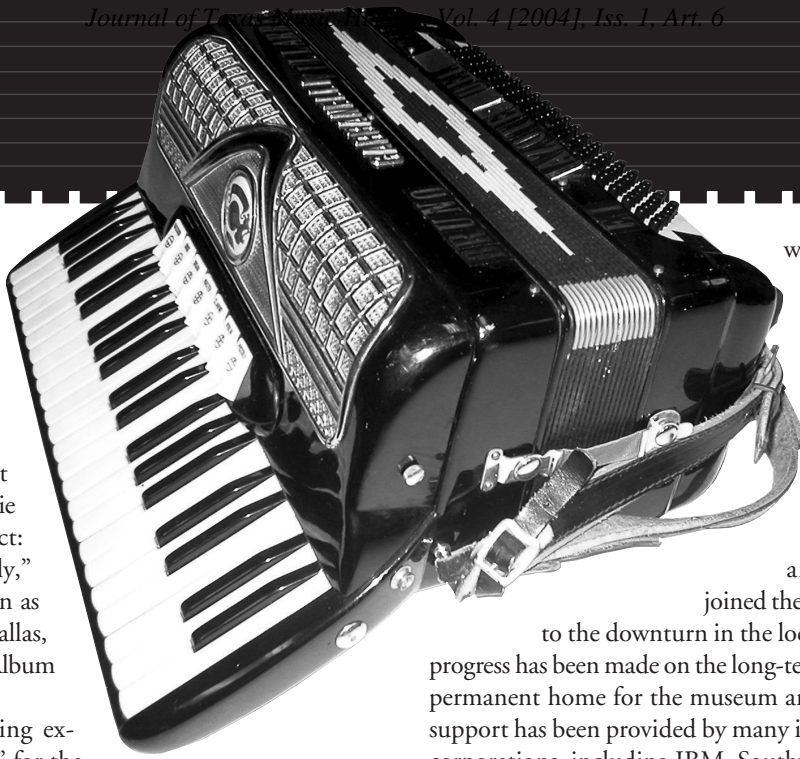
Texas firsts. For example, a survey of Grammy winners from Texas drew attention to the many musicians from our state who have won the coveted award, from Hall-of-Famer Vernon Dalhart to country favorites the Dixie Chicks. (Little-known fact: the creator of “Woolly Bully,” Sam the Sham, also known as Domingo Zamudio of Dallas, won a Grammy for “Best Album Notes.”)

Another ground-breaking exhibit, “Our Native Spirit,” for the first time assembled the musical evidence of the scattered Native American groups of Texas. At a memorable concert, flutists William Gutierrez and Dr. Mario Garza played rare Native American flutes made in nineteenth-century Texas and loaned from the archives of the Texas Memorial Museum.

The Texas Music Museum’s own collections include the largest known gathering of sheet music devoted to Texas songwriters and Texas themes. Treasures include Scott Joplin’s rags, most works by composers David Guion and Oscar Fox, an original copy of “Texas, Our Texas” signed by the composer, and the only known copy of “The Austin Schottische,” published in 1872 and illustrated with an engraving of the old State Capitol Building.

The development of sound recording in Texas is documented in extremely rare early Edison cylinder recordings, 78 rpm Victrola records, 45s, long-playing records, eight-tracks, and CDs by both popular and classical musicians from Texas—all still playable on fully restored equipment in the museum’s possession. A special treasure comes from the Ideal record company in Alice, Texas, and the family of its founder Armando Marroquín; this is the machine that cut the 78 rpm records of all the post-World War II South Texas Tejano greats, from Carmen y Laura to Narciso Martínez and Betó Villa.

Among the musical instruments in the TMM collection are historic church organs, player pianos, an early rock and roll Farfisa keyboard, and an accordion once owned by Tejano legend Bruno Villareal, who was the first Tejano accordionist to record in 1930. Reproducing rolls in the TMM collections capture all the dynamics of the original recording artists. Among TMM’s rare rolls are those made by Olga Samaroff (Lucie Hickenlooper of San Antonio), the first American woman pianist to present in recital all 32 of Beethoven’s piano sonatas. The legacy of recordings on reproducing piano rolls by another early recording artist, Ruth Bingaman Smith, is especially significant for her interpretations of the works of Texas composers, including fellow San Antonian John Steinfeldt. TMM also has the only two recordings Steinfeldt ever made. Dallas-born pianist Wynne Pyle’s piano rolls are also



well represented.

In 2000-2001, the Texas Music Museum, with the support of the City of Austin, undertook a self-study that resulted in a strategic plan for development of the museum. Input was solicited from the Austin music community, and many new members joined the TMM advisory board. Due

to the downturn in the local economy, however, little progress has been made on the long-term goal of achieving a larger permanent home for the museum and its collections. Ongoing support has been provided by many individual donors, as well as corporations, including IBM, Southwestern Bell, Motorola, the Austin Community Foundation, and the City of Austin under the auspices of the Austin Arts Commission. The museum continues to seek donations in order to continue its operations.

For more information about the Texas Music Museum, please call 512-472-8891 or visit:

[www.texasmusicmuseum.org](http://www.texasmusicmuseum.org)

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