

Texas Music in Europe

Hartman: Texas Music In Europe

Gary Hartman



Music has always been one of America's most popular cultural exports to Europe and the rest of the world. While it is true that many Europeans enjoy American pop music, others also have a deep and abiding appreciation for more "roots" based genres of American music, including blues, gospel, jazz, swing, folk, bluegrass, conjunto, cajun, zydeco, or country. In fact, several American musicians have enjoyed larger followings in Europe than they have in the United States, prompting some, such as Josephine Baker, to relocate to Europe, where they believed they had more artistic freedom and greater economic and social opportunities.

Texas has always played a crucial role in the exportation of American music abroad. Even if some of them never actually performed outside of the United States, such Texas musicians as Scott Joplin, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Leadbelly, Big Mama Thornton, Charlie Christian, Gene Autry, Victoria Spivey, Van Cliburn, Buck Owens, Buddy Holly, Bob Wills, Roy Orbison, Janis Joplin, George Strait, Selena, Kenny Rogers, Stephen Stills, Don Henley, George Jones, Flaco Jiménez, Doug Sahm, ZZ Top, and others have helped make Texas music an important influence on the European, and global, music scene.

Although Texas music has become part of the larger mosaic of mainstream American music, it is still somewhat distinct in certain ways. Part of this has to do with the fact that Texas, its culture, and its music have evolved differently from that of other

geographic, political, economic, and demographic characteristics. However, Texas music has not developed in a vacuum. Instead, it has evolved alongside other regional forms of American music. Consequently, Texas music shares overlapping traits that make it difficult to distinguish completely from other regional American music.

Another problem I encountered is that most Europeans do not have an intimate understanding of “regional” American music.¹ Although many recognize “delta” blues and Dixieland jazz as having originated in specific areas of the United States, most Europeans are largely unfamiliar with the distinctive regional characteristics of American music. In all fairness to Europeans, this is most likely due to the fact that they are exposed primarily to mainstream American pop, rather than locally-based roots

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parts of the country. Because of the sheer size of Texas, it has always encompassed a remarkable variety of climates, terrain, and people who have all contributed to the state’s unique musical culture. As the second largest state in the United States, Texas has one of the most complex and ethnically diverse populations in the country spread across 261,914 square miles and two time zones that include deserts, swamps, pine forests, grasslands, mountains, and beaches. Texas is home to two of the nation’s top ten largest urban centers, yet most of this vast state is blanketed by farms, ranches, small towns, and open rural space.

The Lone Star State’s music reflects the incredible diversity of cultural influences in the region, including cajun and zydeco from French-speaking blacks and whites in East Texas, conjunto and Tejano along the Mexican border in South Texas, German and Czech music throughout Central Texas, western swing from across the Plains of North and West Texas, blues from Houston and Dallas, and country, rock and roll, and other genres spread throughout the state. With a resurgence of interest in regional culture during recent years, it seems that Texans, now more than ever, are celebrating the unique qualities of the state’s music. These distinct regional influences in Texas music can still be heard, whether that music is being performed at home or abroad.

Having lived, traveled, and played music in Europe off and on for over 20 years, I decided to tour several countries in the summer of 2003 specifically to look for evidence of this aspect of Texas’s cultural impact on the European continent. Searching for traces of musical influences from the Lone Star State in Europe presented several challenges. First, it is impossible to completely separate “Texas” music from all other forms of American music. It is true that Texas culture is somewhat different from that of other parts of the country, because of the state’s unique ethnic,

music. Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that most Americans, likewise, have little understanding of regional differences in music throughout Europe.

Because many Europeans are not familiar with the distinct regional characteristics of American music, it is difficult for them to distinguish between music from Texas and music from other parts of the United States. Also, many Europeans I spoke with had no idea that a particular artist, whom they considered very influential, was from Texas or had been shaped by the unique cultural environment of the American Southwest.

Perhaps the best example of this involves the prolific blues singer-songwriter Huddie “Leadbelly” Ledbetter. Leadbelly was born on the Louisiana-Texas border and spent much of his time in the Dallas neighborhood of “Deep Ellum,” where he performed with Blind Lemon Jefferson and others.² Leadbelly is credited with having written or adapted such well-known songs as “Goodnight Irene,” “Midnight Special,” “In the Pines,” and “House of the Rising Sun.” Although I heard these and other songs performed in different languages throughout Europe, most people I spoke with did not know they were Leadbelly songs, and no one I talked to knew that Leadbelly was a Texas-based musician.

Perhaps, in a larger sense, it is not so important that most Europeans, or Americans, for that matter, be aware of where particular forms of music originated, or what local or regional factors influenced certain artists. After all, music is a “universal language” shared and enjoyed by everyone. However, as a historian, I was intrigued by the challenge of searching for discernable traces of Texas culture in the music performed in Europe today. The following is a roughly chronological account of my travels through several European countries in July and August of 2003 as part of an effort to observe and better understand the influence

of Texas culture, particularly music, throughout Europe.

France

My journey began in France. Two good friends from Lyon, Jacques and Anne Marie Spiry, who travel each year to the South by Southwest Music Festival in Austin, had convinced me to come to the Festival Country Rendez-Vous in Craponne sur Arzon, in the Haute-Loire region of South Central France. Now in its seventeenth year, Country Rendez-Vous has become one of the biggest music festivals in Europe.³ Jacques, who has a Texas music radio program in Lyon, promotes Texas music throughout France and has helped recruit Texas artists for the festival.⁴

The list of American performers at Festival Country Rendez-Vous is impressive. Such artists as Bill Monroe, Steve Earle, Guy Clark, Allison Krauss and Union Station, the Derailers, Kathy Mattea, J.D. Crowe and the New South, Hot Club of Cowtown, the Hackberry Ramblers, and others have performed there. The festival is very professionally run, and it was both interesting and gratifying to see the level of affection and interaction between the performers and the audience members.

As wonderful as the music onstage was, I found, as I often do, that some of the most enjoyable and enlightening moments occur backstage. That was particularly true at this festival, where I met a variety of musicians, agents, producers, journalists, and radio and TV professionals who were quite knowledgeable about American regional music and very eager to discuss Texas music and what sets it apart from other types of music.⁵

Georges Carrier, President of Festival Country Rendez-Vous, is an English professor in Lyon and has a thorough understanding of American musical culture, including that of Texas and the Southwest. He stressed that Texas always has been a “crossroads of culture,” with Hispanic, Anglo, African, German, French, and other ethnic influences combining in a unique way that continues to shape the music of the Southwest. Carrier acknowledged that most Europeans do not fully recognize the regional differences in American music. However, he seems dedicated to bringing a broad variety of outstanding performers to his stage, not only to entertain, but also to help educate festival goers about the rich diversity of American regional music.⁶

Jacques Spiry, who also has an intimate knowledge of Texas

music, emphasized the importance of language in shaping Europeans’ understanding and appreciation of American regional music. For example, he pointed out that, in some European countries, such as Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Germany, where many people speak English, Texas singer-songwriters are very popular, since audiences are better able to understand the subtleties of their storytelling.⁷ In France, Spiry says, most people are not aware of the ethnic complexities of southwestern culture and tend to equate “Texas culture” with cowboy hats, boots, and cowboy songs. However, as Spiry makes clear, there are notable exceptions, such as the remarkable popularity among French audiences of former Austin singer-songwriter Calvin Russell. Russell, whose raw singing and songwriting style are reminiscent



of Texas great Townes Van Zandt, developed a huge following in France in the 1980s and is still popular there today.⁸

I spoke with a number of other music professionals at the festival and was quite impressed with the depth of their knowledge regarding Texas music. In fact, one issue that everyone seemed to want to discuss was the contrast between “Texas” country music and “Nashville” country music. Everyone agreed that most of the country music coming out of Nashville in recent decades has had a much different sound than that coming from Texas. Several people suggested that Nashville tends to promote a more pop-oriented style of country music, represented by such artists as Shania Twain, Faith Hill, and Tim McGraw, while Texas, on the other hand, has a history of producing musicians who cut against the grain of mainstream country with a more raw, unpolished sound. They cited Bob Wills, Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, the Texas Tornados, Steve Earle, Lyle Lovett, Robert Earl Keen, and the Dixie Chicks as examples of the different type of country music for which the Lone Star State has become known.

Almost all of the music professionals I spoke with at the Festival Country Rendez-Vous emphasized the importance of ethnic diversity in Texas music. Jacques Bremond, publisher of *Le Cri du Coyote* (*Cry of the Coyote*), a wonderful journal covering all aspects of country, bluegrass, cajun, blues, western



RANCH HOUSE FAVORITES



Hillbilly & Western Swing

swing, rockabilly, honky tonk, and other forms of roots music, discussed at length how Texas music and Texas musicians have a distinctive sound, because of the cultural cross pollination of so many different ethnic groups in the Southwest.⁹ Another French publication, *Rock and Roll Revue*, carries articles on rockabilly that emphasize how diverse artists and influences from Texas helped shaped early rock and roll.¹⁰

Dominique Costanoga has a Texas music radio program in southern France that is broadcast to an audience of approximately one half million. He not only cited the importance of multi-ethnic influences in shaping a unique Texas sound, but Costanoga provided an interesting example of how the special ethnic characteristics of Texas music can appeal to certain ethnic groups in Europe. For instance, he noted that Tex-Mex music is very popular among his listeners, partly because there are so many Spanish-speaking people throughout his broadcast area in southern France along the border with Spain.¹¹

It soon became clear to me that the influence of *música tejana*, or Mexican-American music from Texas, reached far beyond the French-Spanish border. Tomahawk, a band from near Bern, Switzerland, included among its repertoire several songs from the Texas Tornados. The Texas Tornados, which included Doug Sahm, Flaco Jiménez, Augie Meyers, and Freddie Fender, blended together rock and roll, conjunto, polka, and country, using accordions, guitars, fiddles, and keyboards. The Tornados may well have been the most eclectic Texas band in recent years to achieve international fame. The members of Tomahawk explained that they began playing in the 1990s primarily as a “cover” band performing Nashville hits, but they soon became intrigued by the blend of ethnic musical genres they heard on recordings from Texas artists, including the Texas Tornados and various western

swing groups. Now, Tomahawk plays throughout Europe, integrating a more diverse “Texas” sound into its performance.¹²

The influence of Texas music stretches beyond France’s borders in other ways, as well. Alain Joris, who hosts a Texas music radio program in Belgium, spoke about the popular newer genre commonly called “Americana,” best represented by such Lone Star artists as Lyle Lovett, Robert Earl Keen, Pat Green, Kevin Fowler, Randy Rogers, Reckless Kelly, and others. As Joris correctly noted, the Americana style is rooted in the Texas singer-songwriter tradition, but it is also heavily influenced by Texas honky tonk and western swing groups, ranging from Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys to Asleep at the Wheel and the Cornell Hurd Band.¹³

One of the highlights of the festival was a press conference attended by members of both the European and American media and music industries. As a guest panelist at the press conference, I had the opportunity to answer, as well as ask, questions from the audience and other panelists. Once again, the topic arose of how and why Texas music is unique. As I fielded questions and listened to others discussing the issue, I began to sense that, perhaps, more Europeans than I had realized do, in fact, have a deeper understanding of the complexities of regional American music.

The final evening of the French festival in France included a powerful performance by the Austin-based group the Derailers. I strolled through the exuberant crowd of some 20,000 fans, who were rocking, swaying, and dancing, as the Derailers pounded out everything from gospel to honky tonk and Buck Owens to the Beatles. I passed dozens of vendors selling CDs, clothing, and souvenirs, many with “Texas” or “cowboy” themes. As I stood in line at the “Tex-Mex” food booth, which, coincidentally, seemed to consistently attract more patrons than any of the other food booths, I concluded that, Texas music and culture have, indeed, left a distinct impression on this part of Europe, even if they are not always recognized as such by those who embrace them.

The Netherlands

My next stop was the Netherlands, where I visited with musician friends whom I had met at other European festivals in previous years. The Netherlands has long had a thriving roots and “alternative” music scene. On my first visit to that country in 1980, I went to several venues that featured regional American music, including some that specifically promoted Texas music, food, and culture.

In Utrecht, I visited Arnold Lasseur and Robert Kanis, who play in two bands, the Hillbilly Boogiemmen and the Bluegrass Boogiemmen. Both versions of the Boogiemmen have performed throughout Europe and the United States, including several appearances in Texas, and have come to be regarded as Holland’s premier purveyors of bluegrass.¹⁴ Although the Boogiemmen perform mainly bluegrass in their shows, they are all very well-versed in country, rockabilly, western swing, and other forms of American roots music. As we sat in a sidewalk café one night swapping songs and jamming well into the morning, these talented musicians moved with ease from one musical style to the next.

Not only are the Boogiemmen accomplished and versatile players,

but they also proved to be very knowledgeable about the history behind these different musical genres. Although they admitted that most of their fellow countrymen do not have a strong sense of regional differences in American music, Lasseur and Kanis said that there is a growing awareness of the unique, more ethnically diverse musical culture of the Southwest. Part of this is the result of so many Texas musicians, including Ponty Bone, Terri Hendrix, Lloyd Maines, Ray Wylie Hubbard, Dale Watson, and others, who frequently perform in the Netherlands. Lasseur also spoke about how he and other Dutch musicians he knows have been influenced from a very early age by such Texas artists as Lefty Frizzell, Ernest Tubb, Bob Wills, George Jones, and others.¹⁵

Several other musicians I spoke with in Holland echoed those same sentiments. Bertie van der Heijdt plays upright bass in the Dutch western swing band the Ranch House Favorites, which has backed Texas honky tonk legend Hank Thompson on tour in Europe. Van der Heijdt became interested in southwestern culture at an early age from watching Gene Autry and other movie cowboys on television. He grew to love country music in general, but, after first hearing Bob Wills's MGM record "Ranch House Favorites," van der Heijdt became passionate about western swing.

On the subject of "Nashville versus Austin," van der Heijdt makes the very valid point that these two musical epicenters should not necessarily be seen as competitors, but, instead, as partners in a mostly symbiotic relationship. After all, not only have Texas musicians, such as Bob Wills, Lefty Frizzell, George Jones, Ernest Tubb, Ray Price, Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, Barbara Mandrell, Kenny Rogers, Roger Miller, Kris Kristofferson, Johnny Rodriguez, Tanya Tucker, George Strait, Lee Ann Rimes, and others had a profound impact on shaping the "Nashville sound," but Nashville has helped bring many such Texas artists to the attention of national and international audiences.¹⁶

Cor Sanne, an international music agent based in the Netherlands, has been listening to Tex Ritter, Ray Price, Buddy Holly, and others since childhood. However, it was years before Sanne realized that these early influences on his career were from Texas and had been shaped by the particular history and culture of that region of the United States. Sanne also mentioned that more and more Europeans are beginning to understand the regional nuances of American music, even though much of what they are exposed to is still mainstream popular music.¹⁷ From what I observed, Sanne is correct. There does seem to be a growing awareness of distinct regional American musical traditions, especially in the Netherlands.

Germany

From Holland, I traveled southeastward into Germany. I had lived and worked as a musician in southern Germany in the

1980s and already had a good sense of how American musical culture was experienced there. In the process of revisiting some old familiar locations and discovering new ones, I was able to confirm much of what I remembered, but I also found that the influence Texas has had on at least some aspects of the German music scene was even greater than I had realized.

My first taste of how Germans perceive Texas history and culture on this part of the journey came while staying with good friends, Robert and Ingrid Bayer, in Friedburg, just west of Munich. The Bayer's children, Veronika and Stefan, wanted to know more about Texas and were asking questions about the state's history and culture. Like most other Europeans I have spoken with over the years, they imagine Texas to be mainly a land of cowboys, cattle, and open prairie. Although these are all important characteristics of the Lone Star State and its history, this image of Texas as a relic of the "Old West" is still a powerful force in shaping how many people throughout the world perceive of the state, its culture, and its music.

After discussing the mythology and folklore of Texas with the Bayer family, we all decided to attend a music festival in downtown Friedburg. Much to my surprise, there among the medieval walls of the "Altstadt," or "Old Town," we heard a local band of young Germans singing the Texas dance hall favorite, "Corrine, Corrina," in a strong Bavarian dialect. Although it is unclear exactly where this song originated, it was popularized among white country audiences by Bob Wills in the 1940s and now is a standard tune for western swing, country, and even many cajun bands throughout Texas. In any case, it was an extraordinary experience to witness how this song had found its way into the repertoire of a youthful

folk-rock group singing in a Bavarian dialect that is rarely heard outside of southern Germany.¹⁸

In Munich, I was eager to visit the Oklahoma Country Saloon, a nightclub in which I had spent a good deal of time in the early 1980s. The Oklahoma was founded in 1980 by Bruno Theil, a German music agent, and is proclaimed to be "the oldest country music saloon in Europe."¹⁹ In 2000, Frank and Ellen Rehle took over the Oklahoma, after Theil opened another very successful nightclub in Munich, the Rattlesnake Saloon.²⁰ For more than twenty years, the Oklahoma

has brought an impressive array of local, European, and North American bands to perform in the intimate venue.

Although the Rehles admit that most Germans still think of Nashville as the wellspring of American country music, more and more are beginning to recognize the importance of regional variations in country music from Texas, Oklahoma, Kentucky, Bakersfield, California, and elsewhere.²¹ Because they understand the importance of these regional characteristics in shaping country music, the Rehles and Bruno Theil have worked hard over





The Honky Tonk Five

the years to feature a variety of bands at the Oklahoma and the Rattlesnake Saloon that reflect this diversity, including bluegrass, honky tonk, “outlaw,” western swing, cajun, rockabilly, country, and country rock.

It was clear that the owners’ appreciation for regional influences on shaping country music was shared by the clubs’ musicians and patrons, too. I was fortunate to be at the Oklahoma on a night in which one of the best and most eclectic country bands I have ever heard in Europe was performing. The Honky Tonk Five, which includes vocalist Martin Wolf, guitar and lap steel player Wulf Behrend, bassist Floor Steinacher, guitarist Christoph Schlechtrimer, and drummer Wolfgang Kozowillis, played a potent blend of honky tonk, rockabilly, and western swing from such diverse Texas artists as Bob Wills, Buddy Holly, Johnny Horton, Leon McAuliffe, and Willie Nelson.

The Honky Tonk Five covered all these musical genres with as much energy, passion, and skill as any Texas dance hall band. At one point, after a determined patron insisted that the group play John Denver’s “Take Me Home, Country Roads,” a favorite of European audiences but not of most roots musicians, the band graciously compromised by performing an impromptu rockabilly/western swing version of the song. In speaking with the musicians during a break, I found that they had been interested in American, and particularly Texas, roots music for many years. They also pointed out the vast network of roots music clubs, musicians, and fans across Europe. There are, in fact dozens of European websites devoted to various aspects of roots music and Texas music in particular.²²

At the Oklahoma Saloon, I also met Bernd and Mathilde Kra-

tochwil, who publish a very impressive monthly journal entitled *Rockin’ Fifties*.²³ The magazine is devoted primarily to the history of rockabilly and early rock and roll, but it also provides extensive coverage of western swing, rhythm and blues, cajun, and zydeco. *Rockin’ Fifties* includes a wealth of information concerning artists’ discographies, advertisements, and tour dates. In fact, it was through this German-language journal that I first discovered that Elvis Presley performed here on the Texas State University-San Marcos campus on October 6, 1955.²⁴

Rockin’ Fifties also highlights the important role the German record label “Bear Family Records” has played in recent years in helping reissue historical recordings of western swing, country, bluegrass, rockabilly, and early rock and roll. Bear Family Records has reissued some of the most complete collections of such influential Texas artists as Bob Wills, Floyd Tillman, and Cliff Bruner. As part of its emphasis on the historical significance of these old recordings, the Bear Family goes to great lengths to provide detailed historical information along with its reissued recordings.²⁵

The influence of Texas music can be seen in other German-speaking countries, as well. In Austria, for example, musician Oliver Gruen hosts radio and television programs devoted to American roots music, including Texas music, and he plays honky tonk, western swing, and other styles on a variety of instruments. Gruen has visited Texas to perform with the bluegrass and swing group Hard to Make a Living, which is based in the Austin area.²⁶

Even though my visit to Germany was limited to only a few stops, it was clear that, through the proliferation of bands, websites, fan clubs, venues, magazines, and record labels devoted to regional American music, there is a growing interest in and appreciation for the history and culture reflected in Texas and other types of local roots music.

Lithuania

The final country I visited on this trip was Lithuania, which lies just to the north of Poland and to the west of Russia and Belarus. Lithuania was an independent nation for centuries before the Soviet Union forcibly annexed it in 1939. As part of regaining their independence from the Soviets in 1991, Lithuanians recently have undergone a cultural reawakening in which they finally have been able to openly celebrate their own folk culture, as well as the culture of western nations. For most Lithuanians living under Soviet rule, western music symbolized the political and cultural freedom they believed existed in America.

Many Lithuanians love American country music. The most prominent country singer-songwriter in Lithuania is Virgis Stakenas, who lives outside of Siauliai in the north-central part of the country. I had met Virgis the previous year, and, upon my return, he generously offered to spend several hours with me discussing his musical influences and the importance of American music and culture in Lithuania. Stakenas began as a folk singer in his teens but was later attracted to country music when he first heard Kenny Rogers’s song “Lucille.” Soon afterwards, Stakenas com-

mitted himself to building a career in country music and joined with Lithuanian fiddle player Algirdas Klova and others to form the Lithuania Country Musicians Association.²⁷

Stakenas draws heavily from both country music and the blues. He cites Leadbelly as the blues singer-songwriter who had the greatest impact on his career. In fact, Stakenas has helped popularize such Leadbelly songs as “Goodnight Irene” and “House of the Rising Sun” by adding Lithuanian lyrics. In the case of “House of the Rising Sun,” Stakenas wrote new lyrics that celebrate events in Lithuanian history, rather than keeping the bordello-based theme of the original song.²⁸

While in Lithuania, I was fortunate enough to be invited to celebrate Stakenas’s fiftieth birthday with him and a few dozen members of his fan club. As we gathered around a campfire late into the night, we played and sang a wide variety of music, including Texas blues, western swing, country, and Lithuanian, Latvian, and Russian folk songs. When one of the Lithuanian violinists, who was accustomed to playing gypsy music, slipped effortlessly into a swinging fiddle break for the Bob Wills classic “Trouble in Mind,” it became clear to me just how intertwined these different musical traditions had become.

Algirdas Klova, who helped Stakenas establish the Lithuania Country Musicians Association, is considered Lithuania’s premier country fiddle player. He performs with several groups, which often include his wife, June, on vocals. Klova also teaches fiddle lessons, organizes children’s musical groups, and has published an outstanding fiddle book that provides a comprehensive approach to learning western swing, bluegrass, and old time fiddle. Klova is somewhat typical of European musicians who grew up listen-



Virgis Stakenas

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Osage Stomp

Osajų* trypsejimas

Western swing (♩ = 90)

Pirmuose keturiuose taktuose akompanuojantis muzikantas (ar grupė) groja tik funkcijomis pažymėtas ketvirtines. Kūrinėlis priskiriamas labai žymiam muzikui – smuikininkui Bobui Vilsui (Bob Wills). Čia pateikiama Veso Nivenso (Wes Nivens) versija (atkurta pagal įrašą) iš jo albumo “Fiddlin’ Just For Fun” (“Smuikavimas malonumui”). Pradėti reikėtų antrojoje pozicijoje (t.y. kairiosios rankos pirmajai pirštą laikant įprastoje antrojo piršto vietoje). Pirštuotė nurodoma po gaidomis. Akompanavimui siūloma originali harmonija. 1935 m. rugsėjo 23 d. Bobas Vilsas ir jo grupė “Texas Playboys” susitiko su Artu Saterleėjumi (Art Satherly) iš ARC (Amerikos įrašų korporacija) įrašų sesijai. Pradėjus įrašinėti melodiją “Osajų trypsejimas”, Saterlejus sustabdė įrašą sakydamas: “Bobai, per tavo šnekas ir riksmus nesigirdi muzikantų”. – “As reikalauju, kai tik užsimanau”, – atrėžė Bobas ir liepė muzikantams susidėti instrumentus bei važiuoti namo. Tik po ilgy įkalbinėjimų didysis Vilsas pagaliau nurimo, ir taip buvo įrašyta ši pjesė.
*Osajai (angl. *Osage*) – Amerikos indėnų gentis, kilusi iš Misurio.

ing to Nashville-based country music, but are now beginning to explore more regional types of American music. He is very intrigued by Texas-style contest fiddling, which often employs long bow strokes, and by western swing, which is an amalgamation of country, jazz, blues, and ragtime.²⁹

Stakenas and Klova continue to play a central role in what has grown into a very active country music scene in Lithuania and Eastern Europe. A number of festivals, clubs, and other venues throughout the area regularly feature country bands from Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland, Russia, and Finland, as well as from Canada, the United States, and Western Europe. Stakenas now hosts a weekly roots music radio show broadcast from the capital city of Vilnius. In Stakenas’s hometown of Siauliai, the very popular restaurant and night club Juone Pastuoge stages live country music each weekend with such local acts as Crazy Crow and Jonis. Every summer, Lithuanian resort towns along the Baltic seacoast organize festivals and performances that feature country, blues, jazz, and other forms of American roots music.

The single biggest annual country music event in Lithuania is the Visagino Country Festival, held each August in Visaginas, located in northeastern Lithuania near the Belarussian border.³⁰ This hugely successful festival began as both a celebration of music and as a bold political statement. Established by the Soviets in 1975 to house workers for a newly-constructed nuclear power plant nearby, the town of Visaginas originally was named Snieckus, in honor of a leading member of the Lithuanian com-



Elena Čekiene and former Lithuanian President Rolandas Paksas

munist party. Moscow brought in thousands of ethnic Russian workers to Snieckus in order to populate the town and staff the power plant. Many local Lithuanians resented this large Russian presence in the region as an uncomfortable reminder of what they considered Soviet colonialism. When Lithuania regained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the town came to symbolize the cultural and political resurgence of Lithuanians.

Even before the Soviet Union collapsed, local resident Elena Čekiene was involved in the Lithuanian country music scene and already had befriended Viġgis Stakenas and Algirdas Klova. This group of musicians and fans was looking for a rustic setting in which to hold an annual country music festival. Čekiene convinced the others that Snieckus, nestled in thick pine forests alongside the picturesque Lake Visaginas, would be ideal. Partly as a statement of their newfound political independence and partly because they believed a new name would make the festival easier to market, organizers were able to have the town name changed from Snieckus to Visaginas.

The festival is now in its eleventh year and draws thousands of country music fans from throughout Eastern Europe and Russia. Elena Čekiene, who is now President of the festival, has support from government officials and a very professional and accommodating staff, which includes Irina Geichman, Dalia Stanioniene, Loreta Jankauskiene, Vilius Brucas, Ruta Cekyte, and others. With limited funding, this group has built a very impressive event that is well worth travelling across Europe to attend. With a good mix of North American and European bands, including several children's musical groups, the Visagino Country Festival provides a wonderful sampling of musical traditions from around the world.

As had been the case at other places I visited on this trip, I soon found clear evidence of how Texas culture had made an impact on music in the region. One of the most remarkable things I witnessed at the Visagino Country Festival was a very talented children's group from Daugavpils, Latvia, named "Vijolite." Led by their teacher, Tatyana Basova, the Vijolite group performed several dance routines based on traditional fiddle reels

and breakdowns. When the group closed its set with a hip-hop version of the fiddle tune "Cotton Eyed Joe," I was amazed to see how this Texas dance hall classic had found its way to this part of the world, and how it could be so successfully adapted to fit the urban hip-hop style of a new generation of musicians. In speaking with the group later, I found that they were all very interested in knowing more about Texas music and the history behind this song. Several told me that they dreamed of being able to come to Texas to perform and learn more about the history and culture of the state.³¹

Roy Sturn, a singer-songwriter from Bulgaria, whose real name is Tsvetan Vlaykoff, performed at the Visagino festival with his band Stetson. Sturn was introduced to country music in his teens when he heard Texan Don Williams singing "Coffee Black." Sturn had some difficulty finding other country musicians in Bulgaria, but, eventually, he assembled a group of players who devoted themselves to studying the roots of regional American music. Sturn and Stetson now perform traditional country and honky tonk throughout Eastern Europe.³²

There were other examples of Texas musical culture present at the Visagino Country Festival. One of the most popular American artists performing there was Paul Belanger. Belanger grew up in New Hampshire, but has been fascinated since childhood with such Texas "singing cowboys" as Gene Autry and Tex Ritter. After serving in World War II, and being wounded in the Battle of the Bulge, Belanger returned to civilian life and eventually built a successful career as a "yodeling cowboy." He currently lives in Oklahoma and performs throughout the United States and Europe.³³ Belanger says that he learned his yodeling style mainly from Gene Autry and Jimmie Rodgers. Belanger is convinced that it is his yodeling that sets him apart from so many other American performers in Europe. After witnessing the audience's enthusiastic response each time I heard him sing, it was clear that the music of this yodeling cowboy, which borrows from both Western European and American musical traditions,



Algirdas Klova (fiddle) and Paul Belanger (vocals)

resonates strongly with Eastern European fans.

Another interesting person I met at the Visagino Country Festival was Andrey Gorbatev, a Russian musician, producer, and music agent from Moscow. Gorbatev, who wrote the book *Wanted: Country Music in Russia and the Ex-U.S.S.R.*, was one of the most knowledgeable people I spoke with regarding American regional music. Gorbatev has visited Texas, and he believes the state's ethnic complexity, especially in terms of blending African, Hispanic, and Anglo-European traditions, is what makes Texas culture and Texas music so unique. Gorbatev also emphasizes the political and social implications of American roots music in Russia and Eastern Europe. He believes country music has broad appeal across the former Soviet Union, because it seems to be a very "democratic" music that represents the working class

especially well. Gorbatev also says the tremendous ethnic diversity reflected in Texas music mirrors the ethnic diversity of cultures throughout Russia and Eastern Europe.³⁴

Conclusion

For many people the world over, Texas seems to be an almost mythical place—a state whose history is filled with larger than life characters and whose inhabitants have always seen themselves as a breed apart from others. Much of this mythology surrounding the state has been fabricated or manipulated through movies, books, and television. However, in certain ways, Texas, its people, and its culture are unique. Texas music reflects both the mythology and the realities of the state, especially in terms of its complex history and diverse ethnic makeup. As an important cultural export, Texas music has become part of global culture and can be found

in various manifestations throughout the world. ■

NOTES

1. I interviewed numerous Europeans in the music business about whether Europeans, generally, understand regional differences in American music. They all told me that most Europeans have a very limited understanding of the regional aspects of American music. However, I was very impressed with how much the European music professionals I spoke with knew, not only about larger regional trends in American music, but, more specifically, regional variations in Texas music.
2. For more information on the lives and careers of Leadbelly and Blind Lemon Jefferson, see Alan Govenar and Jay Brakefield, *Deep El-lum and Central Track: Where the Black and White Worlds of Dallas Converged*, (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1998), and Luigi Monge and David Evans, "New Songs of Blind Lemon Jefferson," *The Journal of Texas Music History*, Volume 3, Number 2, Fall 2003, 8-28.
3. For more information about Festival Country Rendez-Vous, see: www.festivaldecraponne.com
4. For more information regarding Jacques Spiry's radio program, see: www.radiorcf.com

- or email jspiry@club-internet.fr
5. Although it seems that most European music fans still are not familiar with the subtle differences among different types of American regional music, there is clearly a growing interest, as reflected by the proliferation of websites and radio programs dedicated to various genres of American roots music. For example, two European radio programs that feature western swing are Hein Beek's "Texas" radio program in Almere, the Netherlands (email: Hein.Beek@akn.nl) and Mathias Andrieu's "Keep It Country!" radio program in Paris, France (email: mathiasandrieu@yahoo.com).
 6. Author's interview with Georges Carrier on July 25 & 26, 2003 and email correspondence between author and Georges Carrier, October 1, 2003.
 7. In separate discussions I have had with Texas singer-songwriters Robert Earl Keen and Ray Wylie Hubbard, both have confirmed this.
 8. Author's interviews with Jacques Spiry on July 24 & 25, 2003 and email correspondence between author and Jacques Spiry, December 15, 2003.
 9. Author's interviews with Jacques Bremond on July 25 & 26, 2003. For more information about *Le Cri du Coyote*, see: <http://countryfr.com/criducoyote>
 10. For more information regarding *Rock and*