



Texas Dance Halls: A Two-Step Circuit

by Gail Folkins, photography by J. Marcus Weekley. Voice in the American West Series. (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2007). Pp. 208. Acknowledgements, photos, and index. ISBN-13: 978-0896726031 cloth; ISBN-10: 0896726037 paper.

Pat Green's Dance Halls & Dreamers

by Luke Gilliam, photography by Guy Rogers III. (Dance Halls and Dreamers Publishing LLC, 2008). Pp. 184. Introduction and photos. ISBN-13: 978-0292718760 cloth; ISBN-10: 0292718764 paper.

Gail Folkins and J. Marcus Weekley have produced a delightful chronicle of their travels through a series of popular Texas dance halls. For Folkins, an English professor, her account of *Texas Dance Halls: A Two-Step Circuit* has been a personal adventure. Her husband is a bass player in a country band, and having spent considerable time in these singular venues, she describes herself as “a dance hall wife.” (p. xiii.) Her academic credentials, coupled with her “family fieldwork,” have served her well in this multi-dimensional analysis of Texas’s historic halls.

In eighteen essays that highlight twenty dance halls, the author describes these institutions as “community and cultural centers” that have “served as meeting places where fraternal organizations met to conduct business in support of local farmers, merchants, and other residents.” (p. xiv.) Folkins paints a picture of an Old World-New World conduit that has acted as an instrument of immigrant acculturation as well as “an important link in the transmission of ethnic culture from one generation to the next.” (p. xiv.) She touts the role that the dance hall plays in the careers of aspiring Texas bands, as well as their historical significance in the careers of many established Texas music icons.

These observations and insights come together to define Folkins’s concept of “place.” She then layers in the human element by focusing on the oral histories of the individuals “who keep dance hall culture strong—hall owners, musicians, patrons, and friends.” (p. xiii.) Her informants offer captivating tales of haunted halls. They relate family histories intertwined with a particular venue or community. They tell stories of bootleggers and local characters, or stories of the famous Chicken Ranch in La Grange, which operated with impunity as late as the mid-1970s. Folkins expands the personification of the venues with such biographical observations as her treatment of Alice Sulak, the owner of Sefcik Hall and fifty-year veteran saxophonist who regularly takes the Sefcik stage with her group, “The Melody Five.” In addition, Folkins successfully blends personal and public perspectives with such accounts as her discussion with Gary McKee of the Fayette County Historical Commission. As McKee points out, “Someone can celebrate an entire lifetime in a dance hall, from baptism, to birthday parties, to wedding and funeral receptions.” (p. 45.)

Folkins’s analysis of the synergistic blend of place and people is artfully reinforced by Weekley’s crisp monochromatic photography. He captures the detail and individual spirit of the halls, as well as the mood and movement of its patrons, proprietors, and players. A typical shot might feature a stationary backdrop, such as a stage or a wall decorated with antique signs, set against a crowd of swirling dancers, moving as blurred swaths of light, as they outpace the speed of the shutter. The resulting composition presents an image of modern movement contrasted with the staid visual anchor of the historic hall. This dynamic technique is reinforced by a variety of contextual shots—exteriors, detailed interiors, portraits, and performance photographs—to produce an overall visual component that truly enriches the accompanying text.

Despite such wonderful features, there are certain aspects of the book that some readers might find a bit tedious. Folkins writes with a sharp eye for detail, but perhaps too much detail at times. Is it necessary, for example, to introduce new characters with (seemingly) compulsory descriptions of their attire? A steady stream of fashion-based terms—lace-trimmed blouse, hot pants, summer top, tall boots, cobalt-blue suit, handkerchief hem, periwinkle hospital scrubs—runs throughout the text. On another note, there might have been more research undertaken on certain points of musicology. For example, linking the introduction of the accordion into the Lone Star State solely to German and Czech immigrants to Texas overlooks the parallel migration of the instrument from Central Mexico north through Monterrey into the Rio Grande Valley.

These minor critical comments, though, pale in comparison to the larger value of this well-crafted book. Folkins and Weekley highlight several important elements of Texas dance hall culture—gender, race, and ethnicity—which have been largely overlooked in other ethnographies. Women play a significant role in this book by taking the lead in a number of “two-step” stories, including Terrie Chase, owner of Saengerhalle, the mother-daughter team of Marian and Glynis Tietjen who manage the Swiss Alps Dance Hall, such world-class musicians as Cindy Cashdollar, featured in an essay on Gruene Hall, and such dynamic personalities as the sax-playing grandmother, Alice Sulak, who runs Sefcik Hall.

Folkins goes on to explain the ubiquity of the African-American cowboy in Texas cultural history by describing an event at Wright's Park, a dance hall outside of Schulenburg. "This group [of African American riders] looks as if they've just stepped off the Texas range in the early nineteenth century, when according to historians half the cowboys were African American or Hispanic American." (p. 155.) Although the cowboy's heyday is more accurately placed in the post-Civil War period, when the Texas cattle drives moved north to the railheads beyond the Red River, Folkins brings to light an important and frequently overlooked aspect of Texas "frontier" history. Cowboys and trail drivers of the period usually did not resemble Clint Eastwood, Eric Fleming, and the television cast of *Rawhide*; they were generally a much darker hue. The author and photographer bring the significance of the historical African American into twenty-first century dance hall culture with their treatment of the Juneteenth celebration at Wright's Park. Finally, in the chapter, "Dancing in the Park with Little Joe y la Familia," they highlight the seminal influence of Hispanic culture in the "Two-Step Circuit" and in Texas music history.

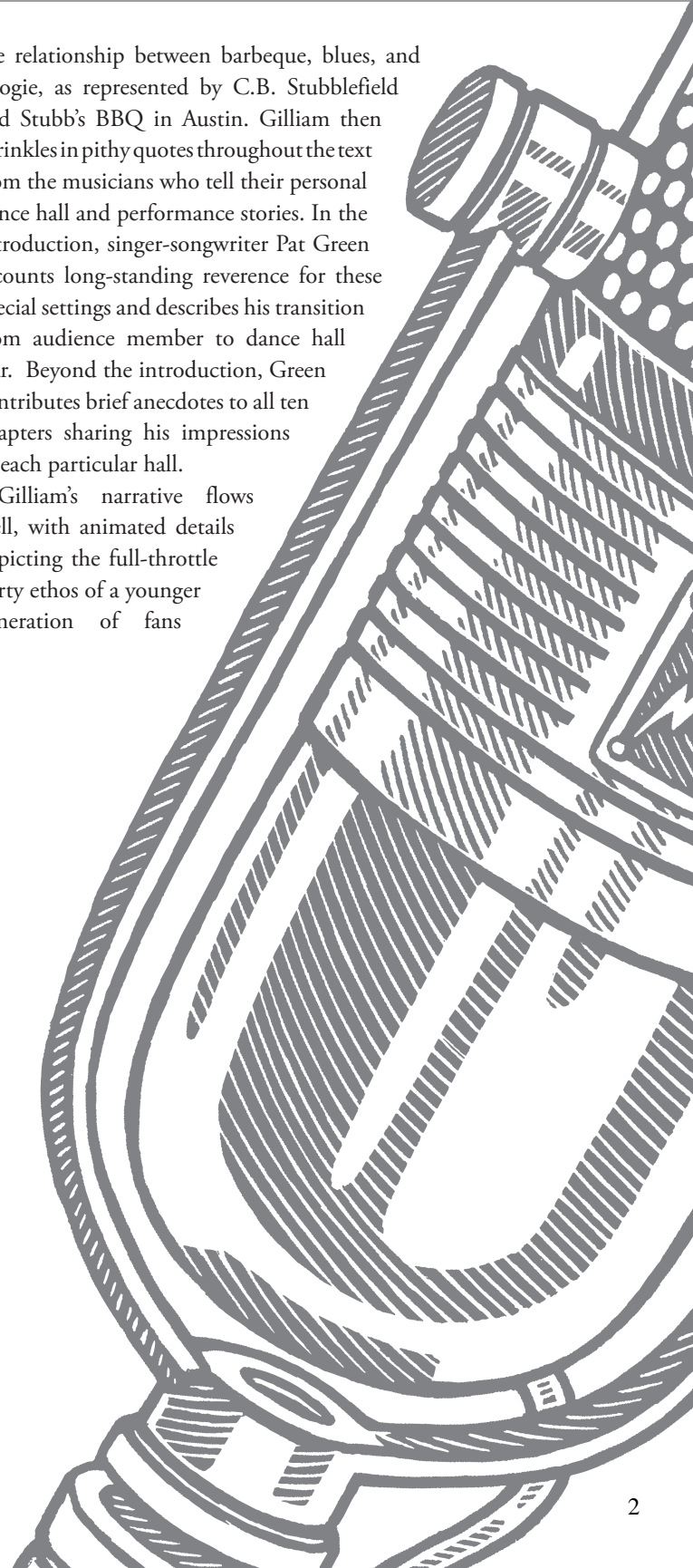
Folkins's scholastic approach in this well-researched, well-written offering, coupled with Weekley's creative photographic interpretations, make for an excellent book and a lasting contribution to Texas cultural history. *Texas Dance Halls: A Two-Step Circuit* is part of the Voice of the American West series from Texas Tech University. If this book is any indication of the quality of others in the series, I look forward to reading more of their fine publications.

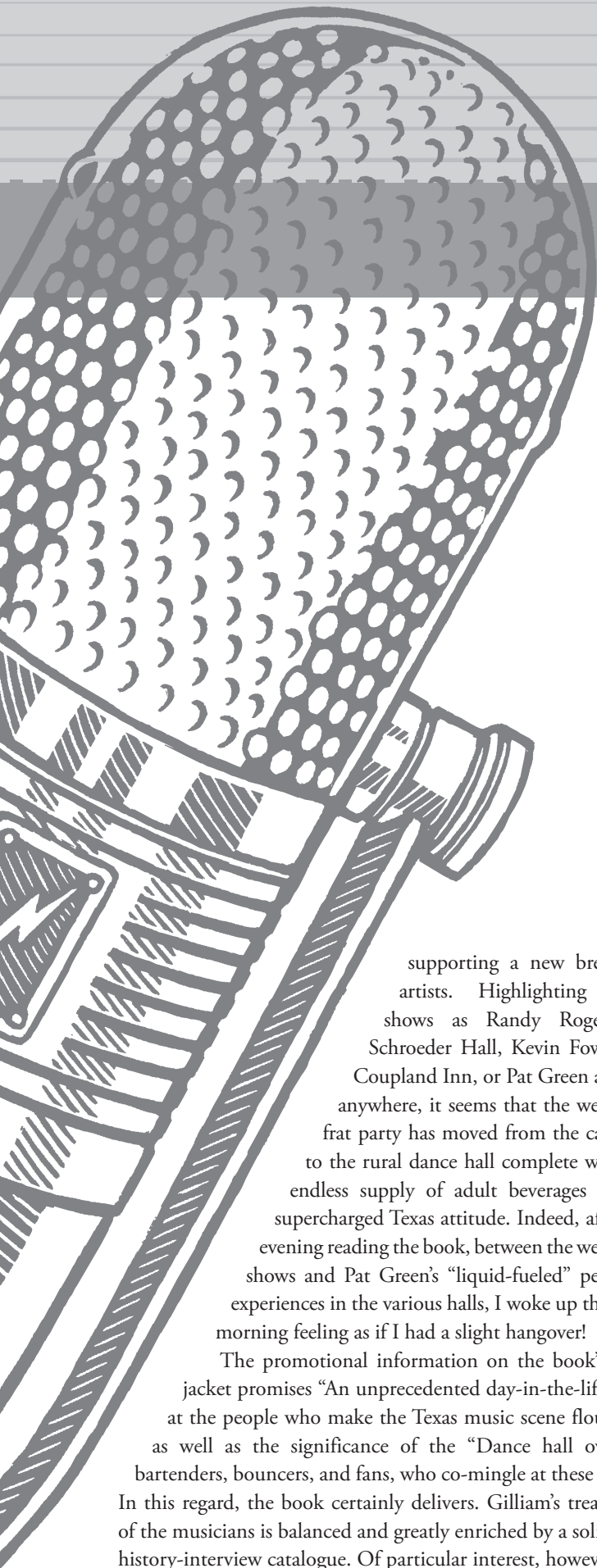
In *Pat Green's Dance Halls & Dreamers*, Luke Gilliam and Guy Rogers III make another valuable contribution to what might be described as the twenty-first-century romantic renaissance of the Texas dance hall. In a treatment of ten venues, journalist Gilliam guides the reader through the performance world of a new generation of singer-songwriters—Jack Ingram, Kevin Fowler, Cory Morrow, Randy Rogers, Pat Green, Cross Canadian Ragweed, and Wade Bowen—while highlighting the ageless contributions of Willie Nelson, the power and depth of Ray Wylie Hubbard's solo show, and the honky-tonk spark and spirit of Robert Earl Keen.

Although Gilliam touches on the social utility of the halls, he focuses mainly on the contemporary scene from the artist's perspective and includes insights from the colorful characters that own, manage, and work in these halls. The author enhances the stories with sidebars in the various chapters, including Hondo Crouch's role as "Imagineer" and impresario in Luckenbach, or

the relationship between barbeque, blues, and boogie, as represented by C.B. Stubblefield and Stubb's BBQ in Austin. Gilliam then sprinkles in pithy quotes throughout the text from the musicians who tell their personal dance hall and performance stories. In the introduction, singer-songwriter Pat Green recounts long-standing reverence for these special settings and describes his transition from audience member to dance hall star. Beyond the introduction, Green contributes brief anecdotes to all ten chapters sharing his impressions of each particular hall.

Gilliam's narrative flows well, with animated details depicting the full-throttle party ethos of a younger generation of fans





supporting a new breed of artists. Highlighting such shows as Randy Rogers at Schroeder Hall, Kevin Fowler at Coupland Inn, or Pat Green almost anywhere, it seems that the weekend frat party has moved from the campus to the rural dance hall complete with an endless supply of adult beverages and a supercharged Texas attitude. Indeed, after an evening reading the book, between the weekend shows and Pat Green's "liquid-fueled" personal experiences in the various halls, I woke up the next morning feeling as if I had a slight hangover!

The promotional information on the book's dust jacket promises "An unprecedented day-in-the-life look at the people who make the Texas music scene flourish," as well as the significance of the "Dance hall owners, bartenders, bouncers, and fans, who co-mingle at these halls." In this regard, the book certainly delivers. Gilliam's treatment of the musicians is balanced and greatly enriched by a solid oral history-interview catalogue. Of particular interest, however, are the biographical sketches of the aforementioned "dance hall

owners, bartenders, bouncers, and fans." As mentioned, some of the sketches, including Hondo Crouch and C.B. Stubblefield, appear in the sidebars, but the bulk of the biographical information flows through the text. For example, Gilliam provides accounts of such colorful characters as Larry Kelso, the larger than life "one-man circus" and owner of the Coupland Inn; "Grandmamma" Jo Nicodemus, the manager of The Sons of Hermann Hall, whose selfless dedication to live music has won her the affection of countless musicians; or Robert Gallagher, Billy Bob's tenured entertainment director with an encyclopedic knowledge of the Texas music scene, are valuable contributions to the documentation of the twenty-first-century dance hall renaissance.

The photography of Guy Rogers III is more than simply a classy supplement to the book's attractive layout; it is the aesthetic binder that pulls together the book's many fascinating stories. Not only does Rogers do a first-rate job with the "physics" of photography in his shooting technique, but his composition and subject choices clearly illustrate his talent as a photojournalist. His craftsmanship draws the viewer into the fabric and feel of the scene by capturing the excitement and revelry while still maintaining the distinct personality of the various venues. Rogers creates an inclusive photo journal by incorporating detailed shots, such as Ray Wylie Hubbard's eagle-claw fingernails coaxing guitar strings into action, and images that collectively depict the vast expanse of Billy Bob's Texas, the "World's Largest Honky Tonk." Any reader who spends some time with this book will feel right at home visiting these dance halls and honky tonks.

Both of these books explore important aspects of Texas dance hall culture. Folkins delves into the larger questions of historical significance and the efficacy of the dance hall as a pragmatic social institution in Texas communities. Gilliam places the hall and honky tonk in the contemporary entertainment arena with a special focus on the musical torch passing to a new generation. *Dance Halls* and *Dreamers and Dance Halls: A Two-Step Circuit* play a vital role in documenting the history of the dance hall tradition in Texas, while also celebrating the dynamic twenty-first-century dance hall renaissance, which promises to keep the dance hall tradition alive and flourishing for generations to come.

Craig Hillis

The History of Texas Music

by Gary Hartman. John and Robin Dickson Series in Texas Music. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), Pp. 304. Acknowledgements, photos, and index. ISBN-13: 978-1-60344-002-8 cloth; ISBN-10: 1-60344-002-X paper.

Music is most often categorized by genre. Generally, the only exception to this is when a community carves out a niche for its “local musicians.” However, something unique happens in Texas; the definition of “local” becomes expanded to “Texan,” and artists and performances are categorized both by their genre and by their state.

Is there anything that links these Texas performers together, other than where they have lived? Many people have argued “yes,” but few have attempted to elaborate with an answer based in historical research. Gary Hartman’s latest book fills that gap. *The History of Texas Music* directly addresses the question of what makes “Texas music” Texan? Hartman posits that the state’s unique history has created a sense of place unlike any other, and that it is this perception of *place* that unites various genres of music under the banner of “Texas music.”

The History of Texas Music is divided into sections based on ethnic cultural traditions. Each section is framed with a survey of the larger forces that have shaped the people addressed within that chapter. This is an interesting approach that provides flexibility to the reader. Often, survey texts cover their material chronologically, requiring that the reader interact with the book from start to finish. With Hartman’s text, each chapter is sufficiently free-standing. Not that you would want to stop reading after just one or two chapters – the prose is wonderfully approachable, and the breadth of material provides enough movement to keep even the most casual reader engaged.

Hartman is naturally inclusive in his writing and is aware of how socio-political issues impact the success of a musician. He analyzes the importance of race and class in the creation and promulgation of different musical genres. And, unlike many other texts on music, female performers are not relegated to their own chapter; the inclusion of female musicians is free-flowing and not at all gratuitous. Anyone familiar with Hartman’s other work will recognize that these references to race, class, and gender were not forcibly inserted into the text, but rather are natural extensions of the author’s interest in creating a holistic picture of Texas music history.

Published by an academic press, *The History of Texas Music* could easily be adapted to a classroom, but

Hartman has intentionally written for a much broader audience. It can be difficult to write a book about music for an audience that might not be musically-trained. However, because of his professional background in presenting Texas music to a broad audience (whether through teaching, as the founding director of The Center for Texas Music History, or through his recently-created National Public Radio program, *This Week in Texas Music History*), Hartman is skilled at discussing music in a way that does not require any special knowledge on the part of the reader.

The History of Texas Music offers two additional strengths that separate it from many other texts. First, Hartman has compiled an outstanding collection of photos and images to complement the prose. While some of the images are taken from live performances and naturally convey the excitement of those shows, many are stock footage publicity photos and run the risk of not adding much to the text itself. However, Hartman and his editors have intentionally selected photos that had not been overly-used in other settings. Other refreshing and seldom-seen images are generously included throughout the text.

Another great strength of *The History of Texas Music* is the “Recommended Listening” section included at the end of each chapter. It has always been very confusing to me as to why so many books about music either do not include listening samples (which can be prohibitively expensive for a press to include) or do not include information on where to find samples of the music being discussed. Hartman provides a list of recommended recordings for the reader to consult, along with easily comprehensible descriptions of how a listener can actually detect the differences between musical performances. In this way, Hartman’s text is not only an informative study on the history of Texas music, but also a reference guide to certain technical aspects of performance. The book is at its best when including these details, and they are an asset to the reader.

The History of Texas Music includes an enormously generous Notes section, and the Bibliography is extensive enough to keep anyone interested in additional research busy for years. Hartman has contributed a meaningful study on the history of Texas music and has admirably addressed the long-standing question of what makes music from this region unique. The book is a strong addition to any collection on Texas music.

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Our Contributors

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Gene Fowler

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played guitar for years with Jerry Jeff Walker, Michael Martin Murphey, and other prominent Texas singer-songwriters. Hillis is currently A.B.D in American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, with a focus on Texas music history. He has authored *Texas Trilogy: Life in a Small Texas Town* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002) and "Cowboys and Indians: The International Stage," *Journal of Texas Music History*, Volume 2, Number 1, Spring 2002.

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