



The King of Western Swing (Part 1)

by Scott Sosebee

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(June 12, 2023) Another in the series on Texas musicians. This will be Part 1 of three on Bob Wills, one of the most influential of all Texas musicians.

Texas has produced a number of musical artists that have either revolutionized their chosen genre or charted a new path for music itself. Ornette Coleman essentially invented “free jazz,” Willie Nelson and other Texas artists changed the entire direction of country music with their “outlaw” sound, and Buddy Holly injected new arrangements and techniques into the nascent birth of rock-and-roll. However, perhaps no Texas musical talent has so conclusively and fully blazed a new musical path like Bob Wills, the inventor of “western swing.” Wills combined jazz, blues, and Big Band arrangements with traditional country instrumentation to create a new sound—Western Swing, which would in turn apply great influence on the progression of country music. As Ken Burns’ documentary on country music said about Wills, “He brought a new degree of sophistication and arrangement to ‘hillbilly music,’ one that reflected his Texas roots and that changed how we hear country music into the present.”

James Robert Wills was born to a sharecropping farmer and his wife in the small central Texas town of Kosse in 1905. His father, like so many other small Texas farmers of the era caught in the hard grip of a southern “agricultural ladder” that restricted most of them on the lowest rung, struggled to make it on the lands he worked. John T. Wills had to supplement his income in a number of ways, and one of those was to be a sought-after fiddle player for dances throughout the countryside. His son would follow in his footsteps. The Wills family moved to a new farm, one that he was able to purchase, in Hall County (in the Panhandle) when Jim—as his family called him—was eight. Their farm was between Lakeview and Turkey, and while John Wills was able to buy his land, farming cotton in the Texas Panhandle in the tens and the twenties was not for the faint of heart. The family continued to struggle financially.

Young Jim Bob Wills worked the field from an early age. When he could, his father hired laborers to help with planting and harvest, and most of those were itinerant African American laborers. Young Wills spent a majority of his time with these laborers and their children, and he became an eager student in learning their musical styles and dances. The Black workers that he took such note of played and sang jazz and blues music, and Wills began to mimic their style, but since he played a fiddle like his father, he played their tunes on the instrument he had: Wills' lessons on the family farm were the beginning of "western swing."

Jim Bob Wills was eager to make his own way, so he left the family farm when he was 16. He began to "ride the rails," hopping trains as they moved across the Southwest. He drifted from town to town and took whatever jobs he could to earn his way; sometimes that job was playing his fiddle at local dances, while at other times he worked for whatever wages he could on farms or other low-paying jobs. He finally tired of such a nomadic life and when he was 22, he found a way to attend barber school. He married his first wife, Edna, in 1927 and moved to Roy, New Mexico, where he barbered for a bit and finally went back to his hometown of Turkey. He found a job at Hamm's Barber Shop where he remained for a year. Still restless, Wills moved to Fort Worth in 1929.

Like his father, Wills made extra money fiddling at dances and other musical shows besides working as a barber. He continued doing just that in Fort Worth. There he fell in with a minstrel show, which led Wills to don "black face," and besides playing the violin he appeared in comedy sketches. He played the violin and did some singing—although as a vocalist Wills was limited and mostly "talked" his lyrics—accompanied by two guitarists and a banjo player. Because there was another "Jim" in the show, he began to go by Bob. The name stuck and became his stage name from that point forward. He made his first record while in Fort Worth, although the record went unissued by the recording company.

It would be in Fort Worth where Bob Wills' music began to evolve. While he had always included some elements of jazz and blues that he had learned from the African Americans he had worked with as a boy, he began to add elements of "rowdy city blues" to his repertoire. He idolized Bessie Smith and Emmet Miller, and it was their stylings that he began to incorporate into his traditional line-up of waltzes and "breakdowns" he had learned from his father. He also began to develop his distinctive vocal style, patterned after Miller and Al Bernard. It was more of a "patter" than singing. It would eventually evolve into his unique "A-ha" that he would use to accompany vocalists in his Texas Playboys. He would also use it to signify changes he wanted his band to make as they played and also to call for solos.

It was in Fort Worth that Wills formed his first real show band. He had met Herman Arnspiger when he was a guest at a radio show and, with Milton Brown joining as lead vocalist, they called themselves the Wills Fiddle Band. Wills—pushed by Brown—began to bring more innovation and experimentation to their

music, making greater use of jazz syncopation and “call and response. They also changed their name to the Aladdin Laddies. But, Wills’ life would change most dramatically after he played as a guest on WBAP radio, the station with the strongest signal in all of the South. After the appearance, Burrus Mills, the makers of Light Crust Flour, offered Wills, Brown, and Arnsperger a regular spot on the WBAP with Burrus as the sponsor. The added income of a regular paycheck appealed to Wills and he and the band signed on. Burrus billed them as “The Light Crust Doughboys” and they became a hit. Wills and Brown began to add elements that would eventually become known as Western Swing, such as twin fiddles, a tenor banjo, and a slap bass.

Burrus brought in Wilbert Lee “Pappy” O’Daniel to manage their Fort Worth operation in 1925, and then put him in charge of PR and advertising in 1928. O’Daniel hated “hillbilly music” (although he would, in the end, use such musicians to great effect when he entered politics), so he fired Wills and the Light Crust Doughboys. The public outcry was loud, and it forced O’Daniel to hire them back after a month. Still, O’Daniel—who began to appear on the weekly show more often as the Master of Ceremonies—and Wills could not work together, and Wills quit the daily show in 1932 (Brown had left the band earlier in the year), moved to Waco, and then formed a new band, the Texas Playboys. Bob Wills was about to go national.

Next week, Bob Wills fully invents Western Swing while also setting a course on a destructive lifestyle.

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