



The King of Western Swing (Part 2)

by Scott Sosebee

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(June 19, 2023) The series on Texas musicians continues.

Bob Wills had left a successful radio show in Fort Worth. He moved to Waco, which he thought was a more central location, and formed a new band—the Playboys. The new group utilized the new accompaniment and style that he and Brown had begun experimenting with on WBAP. They began to tour the state, playing regular dates, mostly at dances and sometimes on package shows. The band was popular, and Wills began to rake in some true financial success. Wills also fully became the band leader with the new Playboys. He was an often cruel taskmaster—exacerbated even more by his binge drinking, which was often. He expected his musicians to be ready and innovative when he called on them to play, and if they were not, he was publicly brutal in upbraiding them. He fired so many members of his band that sometimes he forgot the names of the ones he had just hired. He was also exhibiting the personal habits that would eventually lead him to five marriages; he drank frequently and also habitually stepped outside his marital vows. Edna finally tired of his philandering in 1935 and divorced him. He married Ruth McMaster almost as soon as his divorce to Edna was final, but it was a union that lasted less than a year.

Wills' popularity in Texas grew, and he decided he needed a larger market. He left Waco for Oklahoma City in 1934, but by the fall of that year had relocated to Tulsa when he accepted a contract for a daily noon show on 50,000 watt KVOO—in direct competition with Pappy O'Daniel and WBAP. Wills renamed his group the Texas Playboys and also added to his band in Tulsa. Everet Stover brought a trumpet to the Playboys, and Zeb McNally was hired to play the saxophone. Wills was truly assembling a jazz ensemble, so he needed a “time keeper,” which led him to add Smoky Dacus as a drummer. Leon McAuliffe came aboard with the pedal steel guitar in 1935 (McAuliffe also began to join Wills as a vocalist). By 1938,

Wills would add both a lead guitar and electric guitar to the lineup. The true makeup of Western Swing began to take shape.

Throughout the rest of the 1930s and into the 1940s, Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys became a truly national hit. They began to make records and had hits with “Rat Cheese Under the Hill,” “Take Me Back to Tulsa,” and “Trouble in Mind,” among others. They also toured extensively and tirelessly, sometimes on the road more than 250 days a year, and no matter where they were, they had to still find a studio and do the noon KVOO show. The Texas Playboys had a million selling record in 1940 with “New San Antonio Rose,” which became the group’s signature song. Wills, along with the Texas Playboys, branched out into movies in 1940, as well when they co-starred with Tex Ritter in *Take Me Back to Oklahoma*. Movie roles became more frequent; in all, Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys would appear in 19 films in the 1940s. The Texas Playboys became a set group as well with Herman Arnspiger on guitar, Sleepy Johnson on guitar and fiddle, Johnnie Lee Wills playing banjo, McAuliffe on the steel guitar, Joe Ferguson playing bass, Smoky Dacus on drums, Rueben Washington and Cecil Brower both playing fiddle, Robert Dunn on the trombone, Everett Stover playing trumpet, Ray De Geer on both the clarinet and sax, with Tommy Duncan providing lead vocals. Wills was the bandleader and, of course, also on the fiddle.

Various band members had to leave for service in World War II. Wills joined the army at the age of 37 in 1943, but his time in the military did not last long as he received a medical discharge within six months of enlisting; it was likely excessive drinking and alcoholism that led to his separation. When he left the army, Wills moved to Hollywood, where he concentrated mostly on making movies. He reorganized the Texas Playboys and began to appear daily on KMTR in Los Angeles. It did not take long for his show to become the most popular in the LA market. He and whatever band members he could pull together began to tour. Wills and the Texas Playboys played the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville for the first time in 1944. However, Opry policy said that drums and horns were not country instruments and were forbidden to play. Wills argued vehemently for their inclusion, but Opry officials would not budge. Still, they wanted the man who led one of the most popular bands in the nation to appear so they compromised: Wills’ drummer—Monte Mountjoy—could play, but only if he was concealed by a curtain. Wills had another idea in mind, so he rigged the curtain to collapse, and he had Mountjoy placed front and center onstage.

When World War II ended, Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys were drawing larger crowds than Big Band acts such as Tommy Dorsey and Benny Goodman. KGO radio in San Francisco syndicated a Bob Wills show recorded at the Fairmont Hotel and it was the highest rated show of the year. Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys played the inaugural broadcast on KWKH of the Louisiana Hayride in Shreveport. Wills’ behavior and lifestyle, however, grew more erratic. His binge drinking grew worse and he missed shows more often.

He began and ended two more marriages, to Mary H. Brown in 1938 (who he married and divorced twice within a year) and Mary Louise Parker, who he married and divorced in 1939. He married Betty Anderson in 1942, and this one would last until his death, although Wills still was a philanderer and he and Anderson's relationship was often strained.

Bob Wills ended the 1940s as perhaps the most popular musical act in the nation, and certainly the most popular one considered a "country act," although Wills always insisted that he was much more than that. Despite the popularity, though, Wills burned through money like water through a sieve. He lived a lavish lifestyle, and the sheer size of his band meant his payroll was more than any act in music. Bob Wills had also likely seen his heyday, as the 1950s would bring a slow decline for Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys.

Next week: The Last Act of Bob Wills and his legacy.

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