



The King of Western Swing, Part 3

by Scott Sosebee

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(June 26, 2023) *The series on Texas musicians continues*

Bob Wills had reached the climax of both his creativity and popularity in the late 1930s and the World War II years, but in the decades afterward he would experience, personally and professionally, a slow but noticeable decline. Western swing, the genre he essentially created, would also begin to fall in popularity, not necessarily because the public's ardor for it would lessen, but more for the reason that country artists specifically would begin to adopt western swing elements into the larger category of the musical stylings. It would not help, of course, that country music's overall popularity would begin a precipitous decline in the later part of the 1950s after the birth of "rock-and-roll," a new genre that generally blended country, blues, and jazz into a sound that was entirely new.

Personally, Wills became more erratic as the 1940s progressed. A notorious binge drinker, Wills' benders became more pronounced in the late 1940s, which made him an unreliable performer and "front-man" for his group. Quite often he could not even appear, which angered audiences who had come to see "Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys," not just the band. Vocalist Tommy Duncan became particularly peeved with Wills' unpredictable behavior, which caused the two to have heated arguments. Duncan's biggest complaint—which his bandmates shared—was that when Wills did not appear, their pay reverted to the much lower union scale. One day, in 1948, after an audience in California was particularly incensed that Wills was not available and took out their anger on Duncan, the singer confronted his boss in an altercation that may have become physical, depending on whose version you heard. Wills spontaneously fired Duncan. Duncan would form his own band after his dismissal but would return to occasionally tour with Wills and the Texas Playboys between 1959 and 1961. The two once again got cross-ways, and Duncan left once more. The most acclaimed and successful of Wills' lead singers died of heart failure in 1967.

Wills left California and moved back to Oklahoma City in 1949. He also opened another night club, The Bob Wills Ranch House in Dallas. However, Wills was a touring musician and had to hit the road to support his lavish lifestyle. That meant he had to turn the supervision of his night clubs over to on-site managers. Most of them took advantage of Wills' absence and lack of business acumen and stole from him and also failed to report all income. That led to huge debts for which Wills was responsible, including a heavy back-tax burden. Financially destroyed, Wills had to sell most of his assets, including his property in California and the publishing rights of many of his hits, such as "New San Antonio Rose."

Wills had two hits in 1950, "Ida Red Likes the Boogie" and "Faded Love," but music was changing and along with it radio play. Western swing began to disappear from country radio, and the stations that played jazz or Big Band standards began to switch formats. First, to what was becoming to be termed "pop music," and or country. Later in the decade, many of those same stations would become outlets for the new "rock-and-roll" sound. Rock-and roll seriously ate into country music's popularity, which by the 1960s, saw that genre move toward the "Nashville Sound," an aggressively produced, more technically arranged genre with an extensive reliance on a large string accompaniment. It saved country music, but western swing did not really fit anymore into it or any of the other classifications. Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys were seldom heard on any stations. The lack of airplay meant a huge reduction in record sales, which meant Wills had to tour more extensively.

Wills and his band toured almost 300 days a year, but they did not draw the crowds they once did. Where in the 1940s Wills and the Texas Playboys regularly counted on 15,000 to 20,000 paying customers at a venue, as the 1960s began they were lucky to draw a thousand. The Texas Playboys were reduced to playing mostly small venues. Wills could not understand his loss of popularity, and also resisted any efforts to change his sound to fit the new, emerging musical stylings. He insisted in interviews that he had been playing "rock-and-roll" since the 1920s, and he had a point as some of the earliest rock-and roll acts, such as Buddy Holly, Chuck Berry, and Bill Hailey, listed Wills as an influence. He saved his most vehement vitriol for the developing "Nashville Sound" of country music. The new movement, which some people called "countrypolitan," was a smoothly produced music characterized by background orchestras and choir vocals, instead of the rough-edged sounds of fiddles and steel guitars which had played such a role in the development of rock-and-roll. Wills called the new subgenre "slick with no soul," or, in one interview, "an over-produced mish-mash that is almost unlistenable."

Wills may have hated the "Nashville Sound" when it first appeared, but paying customers loved it. Country radio, which rock-and-roll almost put out of business, began to recover. Record companies either had their acts "remake" themselves into sounds that fit the new growth, or they recruited new acts whose

vocals leant themselves to the new sound. Bob Wills and western swing became an afterthought. Wills' health was also not good; he had two heart attacks, one in 1963 and again in 1965. After the last one, he dissolved the Texas Playboys. The Country Music Hall of Fame inducted him into its gallery of honorees in 1968, but it received little attention. Wills suffered a severe stroke in 1969, which left his right side paralyzed.

Then a funny thing happened. Some country artists, many of them who grew up in Texas, began to criticize and abandon the Nashville Sound as something too heavily produced and too "slick." Many of them, also cited Bob Wills as a major influence. One of the biggest emerging stars of country music, Merle Haggard, cited Bob Wills as one of his major influences and recorded an album of Wills standards. He even convinced Wills to play on some of his cuts. Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson, the leaders of the new "Outlaw" movement in country music also cited Wills as an inspiration. Bob Wills was once again popular, and he even began to talk about recovering enough to start another tour. It did not happen. Wills could never fully recover his health and died in a Fort Worth hospital on May 13, 1975.

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