The Roots of Western Swing

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Texas Swing, Race, Radio and Records

By

John L. Clark, Jr.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 1

Chapter One 8
Radio and Musical Influence

Chapter Two 24
Race and Regionalism

Chapter Three 28
Light Crust Doughboys

Chapter Four 39
Milton Brown

Chapter Five 59
Dallas

Chapter Six 84
Bob Wills

Chapter Seven 104
Houston/Beaumont

Conclusion 123

Bibliography 125

INTRODUCTION

> Thus the intersection of cultural styles in the Old South not only engendered an important shared heritage of repertoires and performance styles but also stimulated distinctive new forms of expression among both black and white performers. This mixing of cultural traditions - operating on so many levels and generating so many new cultural forms – is more responsible than any other factor fo the extraordinary richness of southern culture (Joyner, p. 40).

Charles Joyner has attempted to codify the idea of "Southern Culture" and how it both influenced and reflected cultural expression, including music. He referred to this culture as "one of the world's great epics of cultural transformation" (Joyner, p. 193-194) and details its complicated development with particular attention to the intersection of black and white populations along with their fraught relationship. In terms of music, the division of the races (particularly in Texas) represents both parallel traditions and, more importantly for the development of Texas Swing, shared source material as well as mutual influence.

One of the more difficult tasks facing an historian who is dealing with the roots of country music comes in naming the styles. There was no real agreement about what the music should be called until the advent of the hit parade-type charts in the 1940's. Billboard introduced the category of "Country-Western" in 1949 to complement its "Race" category (succeeded by "Rhythm and Blues") featuring black music – both of which indicated separation from the general "Popular" list. "Western Swing" was a term introduced in some West Coast newspaper accounts of music in the early 1940's, but it became an accepted sub-genre by the middle of the decade when bandleader Spade Cooley used it as a description of his music in promotional material.

In the two decades leading up to the acceptance of these terms thousands of recordings were made which would today fall into one of the categories of Country-Western. At the time, though, records were issued under a bewildering assortment of names including "Old Time Music," "Vocal with Guitar," "String Band," "Novelty Hot Dance," "Hot String Band," "Old Time Playing and Singing," "Country Dance," "Fiddling Orchestra," "Fiddling Solo" and the like, all emphasizing the traditional roots of the

music contained therein. The pioneering Country music scholar Bill Malone was using the term "Southern Vernacular Music" by the late 1970's to describe not only music in the white tradition but also blues and black folk music as well.[1]

Malone theorized that the focus on rural and even primitive musical expression by these artists stemmed in large part from what he called the "arrested development" of post-Reconstruction southern culture. This privileging of rural and farming life he saw as a means to isolate the culture from the judgement of the North and indeed any others who saw in the South a pattern of white supremacy or longing for the old Confederacy (Malone 1966, p. 4). Malone's statement that "Although Negro songs and styles have moved freely into white country music, Negroes have not" shows his firm assessment of the significant influence black musicians had on the development of Southern Vernacular Music – a point that was often overlooked until Malone's groundbreaking work. He cited individual songs, vocal style, ragtime rhythm, boogie-woogie patterns, and elaborate guitar accompaniments as the primary contributions made by black musicians on the first generation of white rural performers to make records (Malone 1966, p. 27-29).

By the late 1920's there was a budding community of white musicians who had become fascinated with the sound of Jazz and blues, particularly as played by African-American musicians. The 1910's was a decade in which the blues came to be known to the dominant white culture through sheet music, phonograph records (albeit done almost exclusively by white musicians), circuses, tent and minstrel shows while the 1920's saw a similar dispersion of various Jazz styles through records, sheet music, Vaudeville acts and eventually radio. White musicians such as Bob Wills, Milton Brown, Dick Reinhart and others began to go out of their way to experience those sounds and began to incorporate elements of improvisation, swing rhythms, blues expression and repertoire into their music. These players were largely centered in the Dallas/Fort Worth area where they had ready access to Deep Ellum – the black section of Dallas. Their innovations

[1] Malone adapted the categories proposed by H. Wiley Hitchcock in his *American Music* book to replace the ubiquitous "Popular" and "Classical" division. Hitchcock used "Cultivated" to refer to music with artistic pretensions, technical complexity, and formal presentation in opposition to "Vernacnular," which was more functional – music for dancing, socializing, audience participation, recreation, work tasks, etc. "Southern Vernacular Music" would include a variety of blues, folk ballads, square dance music, 19th Century popular songs, gospel, etc.

transformed the regional string band and folk song tradition into what I call "Texas Swing" – a localized branch of Jazz played by white country musicians who generally either considered themselves to be Jazz players or who believed in the validity of that expression in their own music.

Texas Swing

The early years of Texas Swing codified several stylistic elements that became identifiers of the later Western Swing. Musically, an overwhelming reliance on two beat rhythm was known in some circles as the "Fort Worth Beat,"[2] with the occasional exceptions (such as the 1935 recordings by the Wanderers) standing out as modern in rhythmic conception. Part of this retention of the earlier practice had to do with the prevalence of dance styles, which remained grounded in traditional two beat patterns in Texas and Oklahoma well beyond the point that most other parts of the country had transitioned to four beat steps.

The fundamental instrumention in Texas Swing dance bands of the 1930's was taken from the string band tradition. String bands had been evident in American music since the Colonial period, but by the middle 19th Century had come to be identified with Southern Vernacular music in both the black and white styles. In its simplest combination, a violin and guitar could provide music for dances, parties and background. For functions in locations requiring more sound, a second guitar and bass might be added. Following its popular acceptance through minstrel performances in the middle 19th Century, the banjo was adopted to fulfill both the harmonic function of a chord instrument as well as bringing a louder and more pronounced rhythmic pulse. String ensembles of between three and six pieces became a signature unit in Southern music, with later additions and emendations such as mandolin and steel guitar introduced to create sounds associated with stylistic variants such as Bluegrass and country.

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[2] Jean Boyd uses this term, although she (and other historians of the period) defines it as a "2/4 beat," which strictly speaking is incorrect. It is instead 2/2 (or cut time) which emphasizes the first and third beats in a four beat measure and was the dominant rhythmic pattern in American popular music of the 1920's when tubas were often the bass instrument in a band. By the late 1920's, the string bass had largely replaced the tuba and budding dance styles such as the Lindy Hop and later versions of the Jitterbug led to the Swing Era reliance on four even beats to the measure, usually set by the rhythm guitar (Boyd, 2003, p. 37).

In the African-American tradition string bands occasionally used horns and tended to emphasize blues in their repertoire. Frenchy's String Band was a group led by New Orleans trumpet player Polite Christian including banjo, guitar and bass that was based in Dallas in the late 1920's and recorded two sides (one blues and one folk form similar to "The Midnight Special") for Columbia in 1929. Among the first African-American groups to record was Ciro's Club Coon Orchestra led by pianist Dan Kildare in 1916 and 1917. Their records (made while on tour in London) featured currently popular showtunes and novelty songs, including a few Hawaiian songs as well.

The Dallas String Band was a group active in the 1920's consisting of blues guitarist, mandolinist and singer Coley Jones (who had been born in the 1880's) backed by guitar and bass. This group recorded eight sides for Columbia in 1927, 1928 and 1929 that range from the blues inflected "Sweet Mama Blues" to the Irish ballad "The Drunkard's Special" to the 1917 popular tune "I'm Always Chasing Rainbows" sung in three-part harmony. The variety in repertoire locates this group more firmly in minstrelsy than in any blues tradition. Pop tunes of a more contemporary vintage such as "Shine" and "Sugar Blues" demonstrate a group working to be relevant to a changing audience. A more blues-based string band was the Mississippi Sheiks, who made numerous productive recording sessions from 1930 to 1935 featuring violin and two guitars including "Sitting on Top of the World" (OKeh 8784), a significant hit that was later covered by Bob Wills, Milton Brown, Leon Chappelear and other pioneer Texas Swing groups.

Early white string bands included the Six and Seven-Eight String Band in New Orleans, which began as a school group in 1913 but lasted into the 1960's, making records for Circle in 1950 and Folkways in 1956 that were much more reflective of the Jazz tradition of that city than of traditional country influence. In the country tradition, the Dixie String Band, Charlie Poole's North Carolina Ramblers and Clayton McMichen's Hometown Band were all recording by 1925, capturing an active tradition and giving documentary evidence of the preceding stylistic period leading to Texas Swing in the 1930's. The East Texas Serenaders were a combination of violin, banjo, guitar and cello who recorded numerous sides for Brunswick and Columbia from 1927-1930, favoring a pre-World War I repertoire of rags and waltzes but featuring violinist Daniel H. Williams on apparently improvised solo choruses that clearly point to the more Jazz-influenced groups of the next decade.

The first groups classified as proto-Western Swing groups began with this instrumentation and gradually began to introduce instruments more reflective of the jazz influence of the 1930's. Many early groups used twin lead instruments (often two fiddles, but sometimes a fiddle and a clarinet or saxophone) which may have reflected the influence of Mexican mariachi bands. Possibly the first group to do this in a popular setting was the Southern Melody Boys, a high school group featuring Kenneth Pitts and Cecil Brower, both of whom would go on to play with the Light Crust Doughboys and many other influential bands. This group was playing in the Fort Worth area by 1930 or so and apparently influenced subsequent bands (Boyd, 2003, p. 41). Milton Brown is often credited with being the first to add piano to his band while Roy Newman was among the earliest to use a wind instrument and Bob Wills was perhaps the first to record with drums and to add multiple horns to the basic ensemble.

New Orleans is regarded as the birthplace of Jazz, in large part due to the confluence of influences in the city – African-American, Cajun, French, Spanish – and how they coalesced into the beginnings of the Jazz style. In a similar way, different parts of Texas represented different influences that eventually contributed to the Western Swing style of the 1940's. The African-American influence was particularly strong in East Texas, with the Deep Ellum section of Dallas being a center of black culture and music that white musicians such as Knocky Parker, Dick Reinhart and Marvin Montgomery mined in creating their own personal styles. Houston (and Shreveport, Louisiana) was relatively accessible to the Jazz sounds of New Orleans and the Louisiana Cajun culture and local musicians such as Cliff Bruner were quick to acknowledge the influence of those cultures. In the middle 1930's, Bob Wills moved his band from Fort Worth to Waco and eventually to Tulsa, OK, making that area a center of musical influence in Texas Swing as well.

In Southeast Texas, San Antonio had a large Czech community that contributed the polka style as well as the sounds of the accordion, which was used by the local bandleader Adolph Hofner as well as occasionally by groups such as the Light Crust Doughboys and Roy Newman.[3] The significant German population in that area (as well as in other parts of the

[3] Some Jazz groups of the Southwest occasionally used an accordion as well. Bennie Moten's nephew Bus was added to the Moten band's personnel in the late 1920's, ultimately becoming the leader after his uncle's death. A white dance band led by East Texas native Phil Baxter (called his "Texas Tommies") included a prominent accordion on its recording sessions in Saint Louis in 1925 and Dallas in 1929.

state) did not directly contribute much in terms of music but rather in the dancing culture, to the point where dancing establishments in Texas were often called "German Clubs" whether or not they were actually ethnic in origin.

Particularly in San Antonio (but throughout Texas as well) the largest influence was obviously from the local Mexican population. While segregation of white and black people was a legal fact of life at least until the 1960's, the inherent prejudice of white society against people of Mexican descent (many of whom had lived in Texas for multiple generations) was in some ways even more pernicious. From the beginning of the century until 1940, the African-American population was in steady decline in Texas due to the deterioration of the sharecropping system and the accumulation of huge amounts of farm land by corporations (Boyd, 2003, p. 18-19). This, plus the steady flow of black people towards northern cities in the Great Migration greatly limited the strength of black communities in the region. The proximity of the large Mexican communities in all parts of Texas certainly influenced music, although the innate prejudice against them prevented the white musicians from exploring those styles as completely as they did blues and other forms of African-American music, which were likely perceived as less immediately threating.

Repertoire represented a significant development from the early string bands to the evolution of Texas Swing. While these groups were still playing for more traditional audiences who expected the range of 19th Century waltzes, heart songs, country ballads and fiddle-derived breakdown tunes, they began introducing tunes from Tin Pan Alley, although for the most part ones from the 1920's rather than contemporary songs. Jazz and blues songs learned from radio, recordings, or occasional visits to black sections such as Deep Ellum also became standard fare, as did the performance practices associated with them.

Last but not least in terms of stylistic elements was the use of improvisation as separate from melodic embellishment or basic variation, which is what most of the string bands, breakdown fiddlers and singers were doing prior to the middle 1930's. The term "Take Off Chorus" was roughly equivalent to what Jazz players in the north were doing by developing solos based on the chord changes of a given song with no particular need to reference the melody. During this period, soloists on violin, guitar (acoustic, electric and steel), banjo, piano, horns and even bass were judged by their ability to negotiate the chord structure to create new melodies or flashy showpieces. Bob Dunn's steel guitar showpiece "Taking Off" (or "Takin'

Off") recorded with Milton Brown and His Brownies and later with Roy Newman and His Boys either introduced or solidified the term in the style.

Singing Cowboys

A parallel development in Southern Vernacular music during the 1930's (with roots extending back into the previous decade) was so-called "cowboy" music. As a direct outgrowth of the ballads and stage appearance of Jimmie Rodgers, this style featured a reliance on songs about or set in the old west with cowboys, Indians, the ranch and the range playing prominent roles. While a great deal of the music was heavily stylized and had little or no direct connection to the west, singers such as Carl T. Sprague, Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, and the Sons of the Pioneers were presented as cowboys to one degree or another and many became stars in western films during the 1930's and 1940's. The first great female star in country music, Patsy Montana, came from this background, although most of her records, including her hit "I Wanna be a Cowboy's Sweetheart" (August 16, 1935, Vocalion 03010), were recorded in New York with the Prairie Ramblers, the group she performed with regularly on the WLS *National Barn Dance* program in Chicago.

Groups such as the Prairie Ramblers (which recorded more frequently than any southern-styled group in the 1930's) occasionally performed pop or blues numbers, but had a repertoire overwhelmingly slanted towards music with western, or "cowboy" themes and was located in Chicago or New York for most of its existence – in any event, they did not display much stylistic affinity with the Texas Swing bands (improvisation, repertoire, etc.)

CHAPTER ONE

RADIO AND MUSICAL INFLUENCE

How did the up and coming Texas Swing musicians experience the music that became such an influence? According to D.K. Wilgus, "Phonograph recordings and radio did not invent hillbilly music, but without them the tradition might have withered" (Wilgus, p. 161). He cites three primary modes of transmission to rural musicians – personal appearances, radio and records – in order of importance. By the time the nascent Texas Swing musicians began to assimilate stylistic traits, radio had emerged as the most important.

While the stereotype exists of the rural dweller as set against modernist notions such as Jazz or intellectualism in the form of classical music, significant evidence exists that a broader scope was in fact the case. KWKH of Shreveport, Louisiana was run by a wealthy businessman named William K. Henderson who used the station during the 1920's as a vanity exercise espousing his politics and opinions on anything that crossed his mind, in the process creating a wide audience of both lovers and haters who were attracted to his self-consciously abusive language. Seemingly at odds with his controversial viewpoints, Henderson was a fan of Jazz and black music in general and boasted of having the most significant record library of any radio station in the country. His catalog was mailed to interested listeners, helping to have KWKH voted "South's Most Popular Radio Station" in 1930 and making those recordings familiar to a large southern audience (Doerksen, p. 95-96).

The opportunity for African-American DJs to present their own music on radio was largely non-existent during the 1920's and still quite rare until the post-World War II years. A few exceptions existed, including WBBM in Chicago, which was a "jazz format" station (Barlow, 1999, p. 24) and radio personality Jack Cooper, who was broadcasting in Washington, D.C. as early as 1925 and produced the "All Negro Hour" for WSBC in Chicago in 1929 (Barlow, p. 52). As a rule, black radio hosts in this period were expected to eschew any urban jargon or overtly Southern speech patterns

even when presenting blues or jazz. White hosts, on the other hand, coopted black speech patterns and the evolving "jive" language of the Swing Era perhaps in an effort to sound authentic. Mel Watkins' term "racial ventriloquy" (quoted in Barlow, 1999, p. 1, 19-20) captures this reverse presentation, creating the idea that radio was the "last refuge" of Minstrelsy.

Minstrelsy had been a dominant trope in the evolution of American popular music since the 1830's, with ownership of the style passing from white to black and then back to white performers – each with different agendas.[1] By the 1930's the principal reflection of the tradition was in the overwhelmingly popular *Amos 'N' Andy* radio program that had been a broadcast staple since the late 1920's. The minstrel-derived black speech patterns presented by Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll were generally accepted as authentic by white (and possibly some black) listeners who found themselves addicted to what was in essence the first situation comedy. A lightning rod for controversy, *Amos 'N' Andy* was quite popular in some parts of the African-American community while others found it offensive and demeaning. The point to be taken from the controversy is that black people were listening – the stereotype that few blacks had radios until at least the late 1930's and were thus not a significant enough audience for advertisers and programmers to bother with was clearly overstated (as had been the similar argument made by phonograph companies in the 1910's which kept African-American entertainers from being recorded in significant numbers).

Black jazz and blues musicians were, however, not complete strangers to radio studios in the 1920's. Newspaper accounts cite singers Ethel Waters broadcasting from New Orleans in 1921, Bessie Smith from Atlanta in 1923, and Eva Taylor with her husband, pianist and promoter Clarence Williams making fairly regular visits to New York studios in the middle to late 1920's. Singer and bandleader Lois Deppe recalled appearing on KDKA in his hometown of Pittsburgh, accompanied by an eighteen year old Earl Hines on piano in 1921. He stated they were the first "colored guys on radio in Pittsburgh" and in fact at that date they were among the first live musicians on radio, period (Dance, p, 134). By the end of the decade, many ballrooms were broadcasting bands live, including Fletcher Henderson's Orchestra from the Club Alabam and then the Roseland Ballroom, and Duke Ellington's Cotton Club Orchestra from the Cotton Club. These were

[1] I discussed the development of minstrelsy through *blackface* and *black* minstrelsy in *Blues on Stage – The Blues Entertainment Industry in the 1920's* (SUNY Press, 2023).

broadcasts that were transmitted great distances via network affiliations and high-powered transmitters and became equally important as phonograph records for delivering new musical styles beyond the immediate reach of touring bands.

Radio- History and Background

It is difficult to overestimate or even to appreciate the sudden importance of radio in every part of the country by the middle 1920's. Less than a decade passed between what was virtually an experimental, hobby-based product and a highly organized and professional industry with unprecedented cultural influence.

Guglielmo Marconi's development of wireless technology at the end of the 19th Century had become by the 1920's an international obsession leading to tremendous conflict as well as opportunity. The first generation of radio enthusiasts were mostly young men and boys who were attracted to the technical aspects of building and maintaining broadcasting devices and who would then use them initially for their own entertainment. By 1912 there were so many amateur broadcasting stations operating that the government was compelled to issue transmitting licenses to keep the airwave frequencies from becoming overcrowded. Large organizations such as the United States Navy, universities, municipal services and even department stores soon realized the need for such tools of communication and many of these young tinkerers went on to careers in radio, spurred on especially by the need for trained radio technicians in World War I.

A series of broadcasting milestones during the second and third decades of the twentieth century began to cement the idea of radio as a part of the national fabric. From the young David Sarnoff's solo manning of a Marconi office in New York to convey the wireless accounts of the sinking of the Titanic in 1912 to Lee De Forest's presidential election broadcast in 1916 (in fact announcing the wrong result, Barnouw, 46), and the first presidential address on radio (by Warren Harding in 1923), vital current events became the province of the new technology. 1919 ended with a watershed moment in the corporate definition of radio. The formation of the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) effectively marked the transition from identifying the new technology as wireless to the modern concept of radio, also marking the end of the military control (primarily by the U.S. Navy) over the medium during the war years (Susan J. Douglas, p. 284-285). In the realm of entertainment, the live account of the Dempsey-Charpentier fight in July,

1920 and the first World Series broadcast in 1921 drove the popularity of the new medium into private homes.

The first scheduled and publicized radio broadcast is generally conceded to be the election night program on Pittsburgh's KDKA on November 2, 1920. In addition to the introduction of news and vital information to the airwaves, the effort was tied to generating sales of radio receiver sets marketed by Westinghouse, the supplier of KDKA's signal via its transmitter. This proved the viability of radio as a commercial entity and the willingness of the public to invest in home equipment, which had limitless marketing implications and caught the interest of RCA, which had previously been concerned only with radiotelegraphy and wireless as a means of communication rather than entertainment. It was only by persistent badgering by their young employee David Sarnoff that the company finally moved into popular broadcasting and, by the end of the decade, had the visionary Sarnoff as its president (Douglas, 21-22).

By 1921 KYW was bringing performances of the Chicago Opera to the airwaves and WJZ in Newark had inaugurated a regular schedule of popular and classical music performances. The following year saw WGY in Schenectady, New York develop the first radio drama presentations and virtually every station had one or two people on staff who could be counted on to fill in for missing acts or otherwise dead air with recitations, instrumental solos or vocal selections. At WJZ, announcer Milton Cross was known as a "crisis tenor" for his ability to step into any breach with a vocal solo (Barnouw, 134).

With the explosion of the new technology by 1920, practically any entity could have its own radio station. Chiropractors, hardware stores, jewelers, police departments and private citizens bought the equipment necessary to broadcast advertisements and incidental entertainment throughout their neighborhoods and started producing programs that sometimes included music as well as information (Lewis, 27). The first regularly scheduled daily broadcast was done in the fall of 1920 from Detroit and a year later the Federal Government stepped in to regulate the proliferation of new stations, issuing the first handful of official licenses. By the end of 1924 there were over five hundred licensed stations, with many of the smaller local entities forced out (Fisher, 10). This led to the foundation of the Federal Radio Commission (the forerunner of the FCC) in February, 1927 and the oversight of the industry and regulation of the bandwidth.

Radio equipment itself saw a dramatic development during this period. From a complicated assembly of do-it-yourself tubes and dials powered by a series of batteries that needed constant recharging, commercially marketed radios became integrated into the home as furniture, often housed in elaborate cabinets. The introduction of all-tube receivers (reducing static and adding sonic clarity) in 1924, units powered by AC power in 1925 and the development of the cone speaker in 1926 (improving fidelity and increasing volume) made the industry accessible to the majority of people in the country. These technical improvements also made radio sound significantly outpace the technology used by record companies until the end of the decade, making broadcast of music aesthetically preferable to listening to the standard 78 rpm records of the day (George H. Douglas, 158). By 1930, radios could be purchased for anywhere from a few dollars to well over $1000 for the highest performing models and it was estimated that as many as twelve million homes were fully embracing the technology (Brown and Dennison, 1-10).

The developing market was illustrated by the professionalization of the radio stations themselves. With increased wattages stations could cover much greater territory, opening up markets for advertisers. This in turn led to stations being collected under the umbrella of larger networks, such as the National Broadcasting Company in July, 1926, ushering in the "network era" (Barnouw, 186) and significantly reducing the need for local programming. This in turn led to entertainers being paid handsomely for their services (for much of the first part of the 1920's most musicians, comics and even announcers had appeared before the microphones without an official salary).

By 1922 the need for revenue became apparent as the individual stations realized that they would need more professional workers, from mechanics to announcers to entertainers. A similar realization in the United Kingdom and Canada led to the establishment of taxes and surcharges on private radio equipment as well as national boards established to oversee the disbursement of funds as well as quality control of programs. The more business-oriented concerns of American politics in the 1920's rejected that move in favor of stations raising money on their own. While politicians such as Herbert Hoover did not support direct advertising during broadcasts, a temporary solution was developed called "toll broadcasting" which allowed for individuals or entities to buy blocks of time to present their product or opinions, often surrounded by entertainment acts. This in essence was the development of the long running programs in the next decade sponsored by products such as Fleischmann's Yeast, Maxwell

House, Pepsodent and various tobacco companies. This solution was destined to answer only part of the question and most stations began soliciting local and national companies to advertise on their wavelengths in order to generate enough income to maintain a competitive edge (George H. Douglas, p. 84-86).

The first national sensation on radio was the *Amos 'n' Andy* program which broadcast daily from January, 1926 (as *Sam 'n' Henry* until March, 1928) through the middle 1950's with the main characters being voiced by show creators Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll. These white actors each had significant (if not successful) careers on stage where they (particularly Gosden) had done minstrel shows and imitations of black characters. For "Amos 'n' Andy" the two virtually invented what came to be known as a situation comedy setting, albeit one with dramatic moments as well. The idea of white actors playing black characters and using supposedly Negro speech patterns and language foibles is one that created a certain amount of controversy among African-Americans during its time, but modern sensibilities are completely flummoxed by the fact that large segments of the black audience were supporters of the show and this support continued at least until the move to television in the 1950's required black actors taking on the established roles, which ironically seemed less palatable during the Civil Rights era.

Beyond questions of racial stereotyping and racism, the unprecedented success of "Amos 'n' Andy demonstrated to advertisers and networks the universality of the radio experience and the need for more nationally produced shows. With the onset of the Depression and sound film, vaudeville and Broadway variety programs began a fast descent and displaced performers such as Burns and Allen, Eddie Cantor, Fred Allen, Ed Wynn, Jack Benny and even the Marx Brothers began finding new and more lasting homes on radio.

Rural Radio and Southwest stations

Radio as entertainment was common in urban locations with stations broadcasting regularly programmed live music and entertainment by the middle 1920's, but in rural areas the medium was initially seen as a functional device for weather advisories, farm information, religious observance and political discussion. Music and entertainment programs did not make significant gains in less developed sections of the United States until the end of the decade and then often only as a way to publicize the

other functions. By 1925, 500,000 farms had radios – a figure that had tripled in five years but which lagged far behind the number for urban areas. It was not until 1940 that radio ownership in rural homes outpaced that of automobiles and telephones (Craig, 2006, p. 1). The 1927 Radio Act restricted the power of the larger networks and companies somewhat by preserving the smaller (especially rural) stations' abilities to use frequencies and function on a local level.

"Farmer Stations" were in general regional entities with no initial connection to larger networks and which vigorously fought back against the tide of progressivism, which was by the early 1920's seen as a significant threat to traditional values. While much variation existed among these stations (largely driven by the chief financer of the given operation), they generally adhered to expressions of these traditional values – Protestant ethics, "old time" music and a natural style of announcing and presentation (Doerksen, p. 74-76). "Old Time Music," locally produced, became a staple of many of these stations, especially during the early morning and noontime hours when rural workers were inside taking a break from chores while eating. Most of these rural southern stations programmed only white artists but they were aware that a black listenership existed, although its size was probably underestimated. This dedication to rural music was also observed in transplanted listeners who used it "to help sustain a rural culture in the middle of the city" (Smulyan, p. 24-26). The great contribution of radio to rural areas during this period was in reducing the amount of isolation individual farmers encountered – it also brought them into contact with different types of music, particularly styles influenced or even created by African-Americans, albeit almost always performed by white musicians.

Until the move towards regulation occurred, radio was dominated by local amateurs and educational institutions, particularly in rural areas. In addition to the uses detailed above, radio in those areas foregrounded "uplift" for their audiences, often using school facilities and academic resources to fill programming time and justify the expense of buying and maintaining equipment. The individual outlook of any given school or its provost determined what sorts of programming were encouraged and which were off-limits, often with little regard for the input of the audience. For example, in 1926 the station WOI (operating from Iowa State University) sanctioned programs of classical music by its students but was against what its director called "Farmer's Music" including what came to be known commercially as Hillbilly music only in the next decade (Slotten, 10).

Nevertheless, there was some evidence of enthusiasm for rural forms of music on the larger stations and even networks. WJB in Atlanta is considered to be the first to broadcast a program of rural music as early as 1922, while "barn dance" programs began to be featured beginning with the "National Barn Dance" program on WLS from Chicago in 1924 and what became "The Grand Ole Opry" from WSM in Nashville the following year (George H. Douglas, 177). These programs, while generally exploitative of the musicians and sometimes featuring music other than rural styles, exposed countless people to the sounds and imagery key to the music and seeding the fields for the recording industry to capitalize on the style in the next decade.

Farmers and other rural occupants had become a significant target market for radio broadcasters by the end of the 1920's. Marketed as a "hired hand" rather than a luxury item, radio and broadcast technology were presented to rural populations as an essential item for information, combating loneliness and boredom, and self-improvement. Marketers saw farmers from the point of view of the reformer (who felt the population required help) and the social worker, who felt that farm dwellers (of whom only 4.5% owned radios in 1925 as opposed to over 10% nationally) needed to be introduced to modernism and technology (Patnode, 286-7). By the early 1930's, new trends toward reserving licenses for larger, clear channel stations ended any dominance retained by rural independent stations and threw the ball back into the court of the smaller ones, which catered more to a localized audience (Doerksen, p. 124).

Among the first licensed and public radio stations in the country were KTAT, KFJZ and WBAP in Fort Worth, and WFFA and WRR in Dallas. KFJZ was a 5000 watt station that began broadcasting in 1924. WBAP is credited with presenting in January, 1923 the first "barn dance" program including a live performance by a string band featuring Captain M.J. Bonner (Malone, 1966, p. 36). Perhaps the first station regularly to broadcast local musicians, KFJZ in 1930 began a program featuring three musicians who were engaged by the Burrus Mill and Elevator Company as the "Light Crust Doughboys" to tout their main commercial product. This group, consisting of vocalist Milton Brown, fiddler Bob Wills and guitarist Herman Arnspiger began broadcasting in January, 1931, although they may have done occasional shows the previous fall.[2] Usually going on the air at 6am (when

[2] Brown, Wills and Arnspiger had appeared on WBAP as "The Aladdin Laddies" sponsored by Aladdin Lamps after Wills and Arnspiger had been fired by KTAT in the fall of 1930 due to their performing for a fiddle competition sponsored by KFJZ.

the farmers were eating breakfast), the group had an instant connection with its audience and generated much mail and many calls to the Mill, especially after the program switched over to WBAP and the 12:30pm time slot a few weeks later.

The Doughboys continued on WBAP with frequent personnel changes until their manager W. Lee O'Daniel decided to capitalize on their success by organizing a radio network he called the Texas Quality Network in September, 1934. This network included WBAP, WFAA, WOAI (San Antonio), and KPRC (Houston), creating a web capable of blanketing most of the southwest (Dempsey, 34).

KTAT ("Keep Talking about Texas") was a small (1000 watt) station in Fort Worth that had been in existence at the Trinity Life building beginning in 1922. It is largely remembered for broadcasting shows by Milton Brown and His Brownies band from September, 1932 until they switched to WBAP in 1935. Part of a small network of Texas and Oklahoma stations, KTAT presented the Brown band every day at noon for a fifteen-minute show, usually broadcast from the Texas Hotel. The smaller station was less able to be selective about sponsorship and the Brown show was an unsponsored one – an unheard of situation at the larger stations (Ginnell, 86).

Milton Brown (leading what was arguably the most popular and influential of the groups in Dallas/Fort Worth in the middle 1930's) had been broadcasting with the Light Crust Doughboys with Arnspiger and Wills on WBAP occasionally in the fall of 1930 and with his own group on KTAT in Fort Worth in 1932, switching to the larger WBAP in July, 1935 (Ginnell, 37, 176). This greatly expanded their reach and the recent networking of WBAP and WFAA with several other regional stations in the Texas Quality Network founded by W. Lee O'Daniel allowed both the Brown group (from the Blackstone Hotel in Fort Worth) and the Wanderers (which also had great local popularity, from the Baker Hotel) to be heard through the Gulf Coast area.

WFAA began broadcasting in 1922 in tandem with WBAP, which used the frequency for overnight and afternoon programs while WFAA had morning and evening shows featuring talk programs, sports broadcasts, political events, educational shows and live music. WFAA was obviously aiming for a sophisticated market with their early broadcasts – a 1922 news report waxed rapturous about its studio, which it insisted was up to the challenge of pleasing serious musicians, presenting programs of cultivated music in the early days of the station (quoted in Barnouw, 125-126). At

their peak, both stations had a broadcasting range stretching from California to New York and their 1927 affiliation with the NBC network furthered their reach. For most of the years leading up to World War II, WFAA broadcast from studios in the Baker Hotel in Dallas.

Another station broadcasting music in the Dallas area was WRR, which was licensed in 1921, becoming the first official station in the South and the second commercial station in the country. Owned by the city (originally it was an arm of the Dallas Fire Department), WRR featured music as well as educational and civic programs and broadcast from a series of hotels (including the Jefferson, Adolphus and Hilton) during the 1920's and 30's. By the 1960's it had switched to an all-classical format.

WACO in Waco, Texas also became a centerpiece of the new music following its transition from WJAD in 1922 to WACO in 1929. WJAD, founded, funded and initially only staffed by Frank P. Jackson presented live local bands on its very limited signal. By the time it became WACO, Jackson had partnered with several other businessmen and increased the signal to 1000 watts, making the station a much more powerful presence in the Southwest (Unsigned, "First Waco Radio Station . . ," 1949). A regular program of music ensued, most notably with Bob Wills, who began doing broadcasts from there following his dismissal from the Light Crust Doughboys in August, 1933. Hired to do a sustaining show (no sponsor, no pay) at 12:30pm late in 1933, Wills and his band (at this point called "The Playboys") was featured until the end of the year and their broadcasts were carried to Oklahoma City on KOMA, building an audience there that was to become an important factor in the band's future success.

Also significant for the growth of Western Swing was KVOO (the Voice of Oklahoma) in Tulsa, which began life as KFRU, broadcasting from Bristol in 1925 before settling in Tulsa in 1927. By 1928 it had settled in the Wright building and began a long tradition of broadcasting live music which eventually had up to thirty different bands on each week. Increased wattage (25,000 watts by the mid-1930's; 50,000 by the early 1940's) made the signal reach greater distances by the WWII years and became highly influential throughout the South as well as nationally.

From its earliest days KVOO was presenting local music, beginning with Otto Gray's Old Cowboys and others and its first star, singing cowboy Gene Autry in 1929 (Wills, p. 47-48). After a week broadcasting on WKY and being fired due to a lawsuit from W. Lee O'Daniel, Bob Wills began broadcasting on KVOO in February, 1934, leading to an eight year

association that brought his band (recently dubbed "The Texas Playboys") to regional and then national prominence.

Early Recordings

"Fiddlin'" Bob Haines and His Four Aces was a string band in Texas featuring family members Henry on banjo and Art Haines on violin[3] which may have recorded in some combination in the early 1900's for Edison, although any issued cylinders have not been discovered (Biel, p. 238). The first released records in the style that came to be known as Country were done in the 1920's by mostly amateur musicians who would have been identified as "hillbilly" performers, even if the term was not welcomed by the performers themselves.

Alexander "Eck" Robertson was a fiddle player born in Arkansas in 1887 who had travelled throughout the southwest competing in contests and playing in medicine shows before settling in Texas. After playing with Confederate veteran Henry Gilliland at some military reunions, the two journeyed to New York to make what has come to be known as the first traditional Southern music – "Arkansas Traveller" and "Turkey in the Straw" (Victor, 18596 and 19149) in 1922. Robertson recorded several other tracks at the time which were released over the course of the next year, eventually returning to the studio in 1929 with his family band. The respectable sales of those records encouraged companies and producers to branch out and begin organizing road trips to record on location – a cheaper alternative than bringing numerous untried musicians to the permanent studios in New York or Chicago. While most of these performers were white country people, the influence of regional African-American styles of music can be heard in those records with blues songs and blues expression being featured prominently (Wilgus, p. 167).

Seeing the moderate success of these records, companies were encouraged to load their equipment into one or two cars and set out for southern cities they felt represented regional centers. Generally, these were places with larger radio stations and vaudeville theaters that would attract a range of performers who would have had an element of professional experience. Between the summer of 1923 and the summer of 1927, forty-four different sessions were held by five different companies in cities throughout the South, with as much as fifty percent of the issued records

[3] Art Haines was apparently Bob's son and later recorded on both fiddle and trombone with Bob Wills' first band.

being some type of Southern vernacular music (Russell, p. 25).[4] The most famous of these sessions was the one done in Bristol, Tennessee in the summer of 1927 by Victor records.

Victor's chief producer was Ralph Peer, a recording executive whose career in the industry had begun with Columbia in the 1910's. Peer was working for the OKeh recording company by 1920, when he supervised the date that presented the African-American singer Mamie Smith on the first commercial recording made by a professional black performer in a vernacular tradition. Done on something of a whim (as well as persistent lobbying by the black songwriter Perry Bradford), it was successful enough to earn a follow-up a few months later with the same singer doing a blues song by Bradford – the first recording by a black singer of a song by a black composer, accompanied by an all-Black band. "Crazy Blues" became a surprise success, demonstrating to recording executives that a market existed for such music, contradicting business assumptions in place for two decades. While Peer was at the time a very junior executive, he was a visionary in the sense that immediately saw a path forward for this Southern Vernacular Music.

Peer's first road trip was to Atlanta in June, 1923 where he recorded Fiddlin' John Carson as well as a catalog of local dance bands and piano players. While the focus at that time was on blues, jazz bands and popular artists, at the behest of Polk Brockman (a regional salesman for OKeh), Peer gave Carson a chance, releasing "The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane" and "The Old Hen Cackled and the Rooster's Going to Crow" (OKeh 4890). These folk song performances which Carson sang and self-accompanied are the first generally accepted recordings of Southern Vernacular Music and their success (which mystified Peer, who referred to them as "pluperfect awful") opened the doors to other performers on these road trips by Okeh and other companies. Peer was no fan of Carson's singing but he was prevailed upon by Brockman to release the records, and it was those fiddle and vocal solos that became the surprise hits of the sessions. This success inspired OKeh as well as other companies to cast their nets more widely resulting in recordings by Henry Whittier for OKeh, Gid Tanner and Riley Puckett for Columbia in March, 1924, Uncle Am Stuart for Vocalion in June, 1924, Uncle Dave Macon and George Renau for Vocalion in July, 1924, Vernon Dalhart for Victor in August, 1924, Ernest "Pop" Stoneman

[4] "Mayberry On Record," a 1961 episode of *The Andy Griffith Show*, recreated the excitement and occasionally suspicion such a trip might have brought to a small community with many potential performers auditioning to make records.

for OKeh in January, 1925, the Original Hillbillies (whose name was given to them by Peer and became associated with the style) for OKeh in April, 1925, and Charlie Poole and His North Carolina Ramblers for Columbia in July, 1925. The increasing number of releases and artists encouraged some companies to devote a specific series in their catalogs to Southern Vernacular performers – Columbia inaugurated its 15000 series ("Familiar Tunes – Old and New") in January, 1925, followed by OKeh nine months later with its 4500 lines ("Old Time Tunes").

By the summer of 1925, OKeh began setting up road sessions in places like Asheville and Winston Salem, North Carolina, followed by Gennett in Birmingham, Alabama and Victor in Bristol in the following years. These sessions were specifically aimed at finding area musicians who may or may not have had professional experience in the hopes that the one or two records each might issue would catch fire in the popular market. From the initial Bristol session came two such examples – the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers.

This was a watershed moment in the history of American popular music, breaking as it did the taboo of recording southern black vaudeville and later blues performers doing popular music. Peer, seeing the popularity of Mamie Smith and successors like Ethel Waters and Alberta Hunter, lobbied to establish a dedicated section of the OKeh catalog as primarily black performers, which soon came to be known as "Race Records." By 1923 most companies had followed suit and were targeting various racial and ethnic demographics by recording music and spoken word they felt spoke to those groups' specific experience.

The Carters (A.P., his wife Sara and his brother's wife Maybelle) were a family from southern Virginia who sang religious and folk material from the mountain tradition with Maybelle playing guitar, Sara usually playing autoharp and all three singing both lead and harmony. On the other hand was Jimmie Rodgers, who made his recording debut the following day. By 1927 he had been an entertainer for over ten years, which by the early 1920's had become his primary source of income following an involuntary retirement from the railroad where his tuberculosis made his job as brakeman impossible. As a professional entertainer, Rodgers had performed in a wide array of circumstances – tent shows, minstrel companies, vaudeville and radio, giving him a range of experience virtually unique among southern white performers of the day. Both the Carters and Rodgers were able to parlay their first recordings into lucrative and, in the case of the Carters, long careers on record.

The Carters' repertoire came from the most traditional part of the white musical canon and as such they can be considered representative examples of the "country" side of the style. Rodgers was far more urban in his presentation, despite being self-styled as "The Singing Brakeman," and was as such a greater influence on the future of Texas Swing by virtue of his repertoire and presentation.[5] His recordings were widely imitated and songs by him as well as ones he recorded by future Texas Swing bandleader Shelly Lee Alley were frequently covered all through the 1930's.

The earliest of the Texas Swing musicians in the Dallas-Fort Worth area left accounts of their initiation and gradual assimilation of jazz styles in the late 1920's and early 1930's. Bob Wills (born in Texas in 1905) was listening to dance bands on the radio (either live or recorded) by 1923 after early exposure to black music played and sung by field hands where he grew up (Townsend, p. 56-57). As Townsend points out, his exact contemporary was jazz trombonist Jack Teagarden who had early musical experience playing in hillbilly bands before moving over to dance bands, for which his instrument (unlike Wills' fiddle) were better suited. Wills developed an early appreciation for black blues singers, particularly Bessie Smith (several of whose songs he recorded in the 1930's) and an enthusiasm for New Orleans Jazz – variously called Dixieland or Traditional Jazz – which profoundly influenced his repertoire until the World War II years. Numerous members of the Wills group also identified as Jazz, rather than country, musicians.

The Southern Melody Boys, featuring the fiddle duo of Kenneth Pitts and Cecil Brower, played occasionally on WBAP and regularly on KTAT in 1931 and are generally credited with being the first band in the area to feature "take off" solos – improvisations not tied to melodic variation. Pitts recalled playing tunes like Archie Bleyer's "Business in F," which they could only have learned from a handful of records of the tune or possibly the published stock arrangement (Ginell, 1994, p. 58-59). They were followed closely by the Rhythm Aces who broadcast on WRR in 1932, featuring a broad jazz repertoire including "Dinah," "Milenburg Joys" and others (Ginell, 1994, p. 90). Each of these bands broke up before recording, with Pitts joining the Light Crust Doughboys, Brower becoming a key member of Milton Brown's Brownies and the Rhythm Aces' Jim Boyd

[5] D.K. Wilgus cited the Carters as more "country" and Jimmie Rodgers as more "Western," although urban might be a more concise way to put it (Wilgus, p. 164).

doing double duty in his brother Bill's Cowboy Ramblers and with Roy Newman and His Boys.

The Light Crust Doughboys were the first group of this generation to record, although the two released records were more in the "hillbilly" style than demonstrating any progressive jazz influence. Nevertheless, as will be seen in the discussion of that band, the initial group (with Milton Brown, Bob Wills and Herman Arnspiger) were provided with a room at the factory of their employer, Burrus Mills, to rehearse and listen to new records that they might then use on their daily broadcasts (Ginell,1994, p. 48). One of these – "Eagle Riding Papa" recorded by the Famous Hokum Boys in 1930 – became their theme song "We're the Light Crust Doughboys from Burrus Mill." Marvin Montgomery began playing with the Doughboys in the fall of 1935 and remembered also being required to rehearse at the mill during the day and credited that discipline with greatly increasing his repertoire and technique (Montgomery interview).

When Brown severed ties with the Doughboys and put together his own band, he carried with him not only an appreciation of contemporary jazz and popular styles but a knack for singing Tin Pan Alley material. He collected around him a group of musicians of like mindset and influence. Several years later Wills was to follow that example, taking his enthusiasm for jazz instrumentalists even beyond Brown's and eventually expanding the string band instrumentation to include horn sections in the style of the big bands of the 1930's.

Perhaps the first recordings to feature musicians presaging the later developments of Texas Swing were done far from Texas by Clayton McMichen in Atlanta for OKeh in July, 1925 as "McMichen's Hometown Band" and his subsequent series on Columbia as "McMichen's Melody Men." These records featured the very jazz influenced violin playing of the leader, usually paired with a clarinet, a guitar and occasionally another fiddle. Lasting from April, 1926 until October 30, 1929 (the day after Black Tuesday, giving ample reason why the last records were never released), these sessions were interspersed with more traditional folk and hillbilly fare as well as comedy skits with Riley Puckett, Gid Tanner and others from the Skillet Lickers. The Melody Men sessions were divided between waltzes and jazz or blues tunes, including "House of David Blues," "Ain't She Sweet?," "Wabash Blues," and "Lonesome Mama Blues."

McMichen was born in Georgia in 1900 and began playing violin as a boy under the influence of his father, an Irish fiddler who was active on the

local scene. By the 1920's he was a busy fiddler in the Atlanta area, performing and recording extensively with Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers as well as under his own name. He also recorded with and wrote some songs for Jimmie Rodgers in the later part of the decade although his inclinations were more toward contemporary popular music including blues and hot jazz – he mentioned learning jazz tunes like "Milenburg Joys," "Jazz Me Blues," "Royal Garden Blues," and from a later time "Blue Skies" (McMichen interview). McMichen said that he lobbied the recording companies to record him doing those songs but that they insisted that the audiences wanted to hear more traditional material. After the Skillet Lickers broke up in the early 1930's, McMichen formed his Georgia Wildcats and toured and recorded with them throughout the decade, recording a handful of jazz tunes along with traditional Southern tunes before retiring in the middle 1950's. After a short renaissance in the Folk Revival of the 1960's he retired again, passing away in 1970.

The Three Virginians made four records at a Dallas location recording in June, 1929, although only two were released. Consisting of three WRR radio musicians – clarinetist Holly Horton and Dick Reinhart and Roy Newman on guitars – this group played in a style obviously owing its influence more to black jazz players of the day than hillbilly performers. Reinhart in particular was a blues-influenced player who seemed to be familiar with the contemporary recordings of Lonnie Johnson and Blind Willie Dunn (a pseudonym for Eddie Lang). Marvin Montgomery remembered Reinhart as particularly devoted to learning from black musicians as late as the late 1930's. When they were both with the Light Crust Doughboys, Reinhart would bring Montgomery around to the black clubs in the Deep Ellum section of Dallas to listen and join in with the local musicians (Dempsey, p. 86).

"June Tenth Blues" and "Yoo Yoo Blues" (June 26, 1929, OKeh 45451) are in the tradition of "hot" jazz of the period, although neither are traditional blues in structure. Both are eighteen bar AABA tunes on the "Doxy," or "How Come You Do Me Like You Do" chord changes. "June Tenth Blues" includes a particularly effective single string guitar solo interspersed with several clarinet choruses and an almost falsetto vocal by Reinhart, coming to an inconclusive ending. "Yoo Yoo Blues" shows Horton to be a clarinetist with a facile technique and good command of all registers of the instrument, if not quite in control of his intonation. Both records are clearly precursors to Texas Swing with strings of improvised solos (there is very little evidence of melody on either side) and a clear understanding of both black and white jazz practices of the time.

CHAPTER TWO

RACE AND REGIONALISM

> "There was still a lot of hatred between the races in the South, but music was the one area where black and white were closer than people realized. The young whites loved the black music they got to hear" (Sam Phillips, quoted in Kloosterman and Quispel, p. 151-152).

Segregation was the order of the day in Texas and Oklahoma in the 1920's and 1930's and the opportunities for white and black musicians to perform together in public were rare to the point of nonexistence. Personal interactions between white and black populations were common during this period but greatly circumscribed by the ingrained racism of the time. Some white musicians made a point to visit black clubs in places like Deep Ellum (the black section of Dallas) to learn the music being played there and then used those techniques and sometimes specific repertoire in their own performances. From a slightly later period, Sam Phillips (who produced Elvis Presley's first records) recalled being captivated by the black performers he heard on an unscheduled stop in Memphis on Beale Street when he was sixteen. As the son of a poor white farmer from Alabama, he had not been exposed to such music before and it provided a direction for the rest of his life. As Pete Daniel wrote, black and white southern culture was largely separate during this period except for music, stories, speech and the experience of poverty (Daniel, p. 10).

Interviews with white musicians of the period emphasize the respect they had for the music of black players, but at the time they consciously downplayed the influence of blues and other African-American forms on the development of Western Swing in order to avoid offending their core audience (Boyd and Colman). This audience, while patronizing dances in or near urban areas, was largely rural in outlook if not geography and were beholden to the system that emphasized white superiority as a result of the longstanding system of sharecropping that had cemented the relative position of blacks and whites in Texas by 1900.