**Origin and History of Western Swing**

Western swing is a difficult musical genre to define. It contains elements from many other musical styles; pop, blues, jazz, Dixieland, traditional folk and fiddle, ragtime, and occasionally classical. Western swing is ballroom dance music with a Western flair. It is played primarily on stringed instruments however horns are used in many larger Western swing bands.

Western swing was born in Texas in the 1930’s with the formation of a band called the Light Crust Doughboys, which later split into two other bands; Milton Brown and his Musical Brownies, and Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys. The starting point for the genre was the “ranch dance” style of country music based around fiddle and guitar, playing old songs and instrumentals such as “Liberty”, “Stone’s Rag”, “The Girl I left Behind Me” and “Red River Valley*”*. In an attempt to broaden the appeal of the music to the widest possible audience, Milton Brown and Bob Wills began to incorporate elements of swing jazz, which was at the height of sophistication in popular music, and to add more and more instruments. Drums, twin fiddles, the newly invented electric steel guitar, and a brass section were all part of the mix. By the time Wills made his first recordings for Brunswick in 1935, they were a 14-piece band. Wills was himself a fiddle player in a very traditional Texas style, but he hired other fiddlers such as Jesse Ashlock and Joe Holley, who could play hot “take off” solos not unlike the jazz style of Joe Venuti or Stephane Grappelli. The Western swing bands created a big sound tightly arranged, but with a lot of improvisation. It was loud, swinging music and it was aimed primarily at dancers.

In the mid 1940’s Bob Wills was at the height of his fame, performing to audiences in the thousands who would come to dance to his music. During this time there was a craze for western movies, so he and his band moved to California where they appeared in many of them. One of Wills’ songs, “San Antonio Rose”, was covered by Bing Crosby and sold well over a million copies. There were hundreds of other bands playing in the same style across the country, including Spade Cooley, who was a headline attraction at the Venice Pier Ballroom and had an eleven-year television career starting at KTLA where he broadcast live from the Santa Monica Ballroom, typically capturing seventy-five percent of the Los Angeles area viewership.

The early 1950’s was a period of rapid change for country music. The sudden appearance of rockabilly — the raw, energetic, amplified music targeted at teenage listeners —was a huge shock to the system. Sales and radio plays of country music plummeted, so Nashville record producers came up with a new formula called the “Nashville Sound”, designed to cross over to a mainstream audience. Smooth string sections and slick backing vocals were in, and fiddles were out. The Western swing glory days were over, as were the craze for tv westerns. The modern American was more likely to watch television than to go out dancing on a Saturday night. The crippling federal Cabaret Tax of 1944 had seriously damaged the dance hall industry. Bob Wills was able to continue playing but, as in the jazz world, his band size was drastically reduced, and Spade Cooley, his chief rival, was doing time for murdering his wife. Many other bands either gave up or, like Bill Haley, jumped ship and became rock and rollers.

However, the late 1950’s saw a resurgent interest in Western swing with Wills returning to Tulsa, and later to Las Vegas. In October 1968, Wills was elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame. In December 1973, he recorded his final album, the Grammy winning, *For the Last Time* (United Artists).

From the 1970’s to the present day, Western swing has been embraced and recorded by a number of country music legends such as Ray Price, Merle Haggard (whose band the Strangers was configured in the style of the Texas Playboys), Willie Nelson, George Strait, Vince Gill, and Lyle Lovett to name but a few. Asleep at the Wheel cut a pair of tribute albums that have kept Wills’ name before the public; Hot Club of Cowtown, The Western Flyers, The Lucky Stars, Jody Nix and His Texas Cowboys, and The Time Jumpers, along with many more continue to spread the music of Bob Wills worldwide. Western swing music was recognized as the official state music of Texas in 2011.

Chris Haigh, *The Fiddle Handbook*, <http://www.fiddlingaround.co.uk>

Guy Logsdon, *Western Swing*, The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture, <https://www.okhistory.org>