**BOB WILLS - Rock & Roll Hall of Fame Bio (Inducted 1999)**

A WESTERN ROGUE WHOSE MUSICAL CHEMISTRY AND REPARTEE CHARGED AUDIENCES WITH EXCITEMENT

Fiddler Bob Wills blended genres of all kinds to create a distinctly American sound. With his Texas Playboys, their impromptu jams shot through with call and response ‘aww-ha’ reveal what we can only call their raucous reverence for Western swing.

Bob Wills was the driving force behind Western Swing, a form of country & western that was broader in scope than the parent genre.

A master at synthesizing styles, Wills brought jazz, hillbilly, boogie, blues, big-band swing, rhumba, mariachi, jitterbug music, and more, under his ecumenical umbrella. He has been called “the King of Western Swing” and “the first great amalgamator of American music”.

Wills grew up in a part of Texas where diverse cultures and forms of music overlapped. His enthusiasm and mastery were such that he assimilated disparate genres into what might best be termed American music. Wills called it “Texas fiddle music. “We’re the most versatile band in America,” Wills forthrightly asserted in 1944. He might have added that they were the most innovative band as well. Certainly, they forced country music to open up in its acceptance of electric instruments. Even rock and roll’s freewheeling spirit of stylistic recombination has antecedents in the work of Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys.

Wills was born into a family of fiddlers that included his father, John Wills, who regularly won Texas fiddling competitions. Bob Wills learned how to play fiddle and mandolin from his father. As a young man, Wills performed at house dances, medicine shows and on the radio. With commercial sponsorship, Wills’ bands performed on radio in the early Thirties as the Aladdin Laddies (for the Aladdin Lamp Co.), and the Light Crust Doughboys (for Light Crust Flour). Following a salary dispute, Wills renamed his band the Texas Playboys and relocated to Tulsa, Oklahoma, where he had a live radio show. This exposure led to a contract with American Recording Corp. (later absorbed into Columbia Records).

In 1935, Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys laid down twenty-four tunes during their historic first session at a makeshift recording studio in Dallas. The group recorded prolifically in the late Thirties and early Forties, laying down such classics as “Steel Guitar Rag” (written by Leon McAuliffe, the Texas Playboys’ longtime steel guitar player), “Take Me Back to Tulsa”, and Wills’ signature song, “New San Antonio Rose”. Their biggest hit, “New Spanish Two Step”, topped the country charts for sixteen weeks in 1946. Wills’ mix of horns, fiddles, and steel guitar made for a uniquely swinging sound that grabbed the public’s ear. The Texas Playboys always had fine singers like Tommy Duncan and Leon McAuliffe, and Wills punctuated the tunes with jive talking, falsetto asides and cries of “ah-ha!” He would call out soloists by name and instrument, good-naturedly goading them on to rollicking performances.

In terms of personnel, the Texas Playboys expanded and contracted like an accordion over the years, according to Wills’ desires and the whims of the market. At one point the Texas Playboys were twenty-two pieces strong, although the band more typically numbered between nine and eighteen members. There were personnel changes and musical shifts as Wills struggled to adapt to the changing face of America in the postwar era. Nonetheless, there was always a solid core of loyal regulars in the Texas Playboys. After leaving Columbia in 1947, Wills continued to record prolifically for such labels as MGM, Decca, Longhorn and Kapp. The group also toured the country and often performed at a Wills-owned dancehall in Sacramento, California.

In 1968 Wills was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame. A year later, he suffered a debilitating stroke. There were reunions and recording sessions with many of the old Texas Playboys in 1971 and 1973. Wills’ final stroke came in his sleep following the first day of recording for a December 1973 session that resulted in the double Grammy award winning album For the Last Time. Confined to a wheelchair, he would reprise his role as bandleader that day with a group of musicians that included former Texas Playboys. He never regained consciousness and died eighteen months later.

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MORE ABOUT BOB WILLS

Today, he is recognized as a major influence on music and musicians who followed him. In 2007, his contributions were honored by the Recording Academy with a Lifetime Achievement GRAMMY Award. He was also honored by the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame, Western Swing Society Hall of Fame, Texas Western Swing Hall of Fame, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (Early Influence) in 1999, Texas Music Hall of Fame, and the Oklahoma Jazz Hall of Fame.

He has been revered by such country-music legends as Merle Haggard (whose band the Strangers was configured in the style of the Texas Playboys), Willie Nelson, George Strait, and Lyle Lovett to name a few. Asleep at the Wheel cut a pair of tribute albums that have kept Wills’ name before the public while Hot Club of Cowtown, The Western Flyers, The Lucky Stars, Jody Nix and His Texas Cowboys, and many more, continue to spread the music of Bob Wills.

Every year, Bob Wills Day is celebrated on the last Saturday in April in Turkey, Texas, and in November, the Bob Wills Fiddle Festival & Contest is held in Greenville, Texas.

Learn more at the Bob Wills Heritage Foundation website at bobwills.com, or visit their Facebook page.

*Notable recordings*: Tiffany Transcriptions, For the Last Time, Merle Haggard Tribute to the Best Damn Fiddle Player, also search Bob Wills at AllMusic.com for a full catalog of the King of Western Swing.