

Bob Wills Biography

Bob Wills' name will forever be associated with Western swing. Although he did not invent the genre single handedly, he did popularize the genre and changed its rules. In the process, he reinvented the rules of popular music. Bob Wills & His Texas Playboys were a dance band with a country string section that played pop songs as if they were jazz numbers. Their music expanded and erased boundaries between genres. It was also some of the most popular music of its era. Throughout the '40s, the band was one of the most popular groups in the country and the musicians in the Playboys were among the finest of their era. As the popularity of Western swing declined, so did Wills' popularity, but his influence is immeasurable. From the first honky tonkers to Western swing revivalists, generations of country artists owe him a significant debt, as do certain rock and jazz musicians. Bob Wills was a maverick and his spirit infused American popular music of the 20th century with a renegade, virtuosic flair.

Bob Wills was born outside of Kosse, TX, in 1905. From his father and grandfather, Wills learned how to play mandolin, guitar, and eventually fiddle, and he regularly played local dances in his teens. In 1929, he joined a medicine show in Fort Worth, where he played fiddle and did blackface comedy.

In early 1931, the band landed their own radio show, which was sponsored by the Burris Mill and Elevator Company, the manufacturers of Light Crust Flour. The group re-christened themselves the Light Crust Doughboys and their show was being broadcast throughout Texas, hosted and organized by W. Lee O'Daniel, the manager of Burris Mill. By late summer 1933, Wills, aggravated by a series of fights with O'Daniel, left the Light Crust Doughboys and piano player Tommy Duncan left with him. Wills and Duncan relocated to Waco, TX, and formed the Playboys. The band made their first record in 1935 for the American Recording Company, which would later become part of Columbia Records.

Toward the end of the decade, big bands were dominating popular music and Wills wanted a band capable of playing complex, jazz-inspired arrangements. To help him achieve his sound, he hired arranger and guitarist Eldon Shamblin, who wrote charts that fused country with big band music for the Texas Playboys. By 1940, he had replaced some of the weaker musicians in the lineup, winding up with a full 18-piece band. The Texas Playboys were breaking concert attendance records across the country, filling out venues from Tulsa to California; and they also had their first genuine national hit with "New San Antonio Rose," which climbed to number 11 in 1940. Throughout 1941 and 1942, Bob Wills & His Texas Playboys continued to record and perform and they were one of the most popular bands in the country. However, their popularity was quickly derailed by the arrival of World War II. Tommy Duncan enlisted in the Army after Pearl Harbor and Bob Wills enlisted late in 1942. However, he was discharged as being unfit for service in the summer of 1943, primarily because he was out of

shape and disagreeable. Duncan was discharged around the same time and the pair moved to California by the end of 1943. Wills revamped the sound of the Texas Playboys after World War II, cutting out the horn section and relying on amplified string instruments.

In 1946, the Playboys had their biggest hit, "New Spanish Two Step," which spent 16 weeks at number one.

In 1950, Wills had two Top Ten hits: "Ida Red Likes the Boogie" and "Faded Love," which would become a country standard. Throughout the '50s, he struggled with poor health and poor finances, but he continued to perform frequently.

In 1962, Wills had a heart attack that temporarily debilitated him, but by 1963, he was making an album for Kapp Records. The following year, he had a second heart attack, which forced him to disband the Playboys.

In 1968, the Country Music Hall of Fame inducted Bob Wills and the following year the Texas State Legislature honored him for his contribution to American music. The day after he appeared in both houses of the Texas state government, Wills suffered a massive stroke, which paralyzed his right side.

In 1972, Wills was well enough to accept a citation from ASCAP in Nashville, as well as appear at several Texas Playboy reunions, which were all very popular. In the fall of 1973, Wills and Merle Haggard began planning a Texas Playboys reunion album, featuring Leon McAuliffe, Al Stricklin, Eldon Shamblin, and Smokey Dacus, among others. The first session was held on December 3, 1973, with Wills leading the band from his wheelchair. That night, he suffered another massive stroke in his sleep; the stroke left him comatose. The Texas Playboys finished the album without him. Bob Wills never regained consciousness and he died on May 15, 1975, in a nursing home. Wills was buried in Tulsa, the place where his legend began. ~ Stephen Thomas Erlewine