

## WESTERN SWING IN FORT WORTH: CULTURE HEARTH OF THE FIRST ALTERNATIVE COUNTRY MUSIC FORM

*George O. Carney*

Using the Sauerian culture hearth concept, Fort Worth is identified as the source area for western swing, the first "alternative" form of country music. The term "alternative" is applied to recent country music that is considered outside the mainstream sounds of Nashville. Recognized today as one of the major sub-genres of country music, western swing emerged and evolved in the 1920s from a local music infrastructure in Fort Worth. It included a core fan base developed through live performances at various venues and radio stations in and around the city. Moreover, it employed nontraditional techniques, instruments, and repertoires for that era of country music. Finally, it was nurtured and popularized in the musically peripheral location of Fort Worth and was never fully embraced by the country music conventionalities of Nashville. *Key Words: culture hearth, western swing, alternative country music, Fort Worth.*

### Introduction

Much has been written about the characteristics of western swing music and its historical antecedents, however, geographic origins of the genre have often been overlooked or ignored. Most scholars indicate it emerged somewhere in the Southwest where basic frontier folk music was embellished with jazz and popular music idioms. At various times during its early development, western swing was

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*George O. Carney is Regents Professor in the Department of Geography at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078-4073. The author is indebted to the following: Bill C. Malone, Charles Townsend, and Cary Ginell for their research on western swing, to the Fort Worth Star-Telegram for forwarding photocopies of selected columns from the 1920s, to the City of Fort Worth for providing city directories and historic maps, and to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions. An abbreviated version of this paper was presented at the Association of American Geographers meeting in Fort Worth in 1997.*

referred to as “southwestern swing,” “Texas swing” and “Okie jazz” creating confusion as to its specific source area. Because of the unclear nature of its spatial origins, this neglected aspect of western swing music bears examination from a cultural geography perspective.

Introduced by Carl Sauer and the Berkeley School, the culture hearth approach provides a useful conceptual framework for this investigation of the source area for the western swing sound. In defining culture hearth, Sauer explained that it is “the inquiry into the localization of culture origins” (Sauer 1941, 12). This study contends that the culture hearth of the western swing style was Fort Worth, Texas. In and around this city were bands and individual musicians who created and shaped the western swing sound and spawned a local music infrastructure. This network cultivated the exchange of new music ideas and repertoires, generated innovative vocal and instrumental techniques, and established outlets for performance opportunities on local radio stations and dance halls; all of which were outside Nashville, the epicenter of early country music. Thus, Fort Worth was to become the first “alternative” form of country music.

### **Definition of “Alternative”**

The term “alternative” is used by both rock and country artists to describe their proposed antithesis to the crass commercialization and pretentious conventions of mainstream popular rock and country. “Alternative” rock is characterized by regionally-based record labels (primarily independent record labels), air play on local radio, a core following based on local personal appearances, and geographic origins in culturally peripheral locations (i.e. outside of New York City and Los Angeles) (Romanowski and George-Warren 1995; Erlewine et. al. 1997). “Alternative” country is a broad term that includes a wide spectrum of performers who worked outside the Nashville country music mainstream. According to Goodman (1999, ix), these artists have “reinterpreted and

enhanced traditional country music styles and themes by incorporating a variety of modern musical and non-musical influences.”

### Definition of Western Swing

Several music scholars have described western swing as a musical mixture of hillbilly string band music from the Upland South, country blues and Dixieland jazz from the Lowland South, and Mexican *mariachi* music from the Rio Grande Valley. Malone (1979, 81) states that western swing is clearly “within the country music framework” but was heavily indebted to pop, blues, and jazz. Townsend’s (1976) exhaustive study of Bob Wills, one of the creators of western swing, describes the music as “western jazz” because of its improvisation, two-four beat, and use of jazz instrumentation. Carney’s (1980) interpretation of country music in the South delineates western swing as one of the seven sub-styles of country music that was a distinctly regional phenomenon in terms of its personnel and popularity. Ginell’s (1994) biography of Milton Brown, another acknowledged influence in the development of western swing, asserts that western swing was designed for dancing with its heavy, insistent beat produced by a more pronounced rhythm section. Therefore, western swing’s natural habitat was the dance hall, but it also stressed lyrics, rendered first by Milton Brown. More recently, Koster’s (1998, 11) account of Texas music declared that western swing is the “blue-ribbon chili of music, a savory, bubbling blend of numerous, ever-changing ingredients, and it is unlikely that it could have developed anywhere else but Texas.” Most music scholars agree that western swing’s development in the Fort Worth area provided distinctive instrumental and vocal ingredients to country music, including multiple fiddles playing harmony; a strong rhythm section composed of piano, bass, and tenor banjo; jazz-like improvisation of the steel guitar; and a vocal repertoire consisting of numerous pop, blues, and jazz titles, such as “St. Louis Blues,” “Trouble

in Mind,” and “The Object of My Affection.” As a musical crossroads for several genres of American music, Fort Worth thus became the locus of creativity for Bob Wills, Milton Brown, and others who pioneered the western swing sound (Schmelzer 1985).

### Precursors to Western Swing

Western swing, according to Malone (1985), evolved from the fiddle-and-guitar bands of East Texas. Laying the groundwork for western swing were several ensembles that Malone identifies in his classic history of country music. Three of these bands originated in the musically rich area around Terrell, approximately fifty miles east of Fort Worth, including the Harper Brothers, Solomon and Hughes, and Prince Albert Hunt and the Texas Ramblers. And to the south of Fort Worth was the Humphries Brothers who hailed from near Burnet. Even more anticipatory of western swing were two bands that expanded the fiddle and guitar combination. To the northeast of Fort Worth was Bill Boyd’s Cowboy Ramblers from near Greenville, and to the southeast was the East Texas Serenaders of Lindale, a small town near Tyler (Figure 1). The Cowboy Ramblers’ sound developed around an instrumental nucleus of guitar, fiddle, banjo, and bass, although augmented from time to time by piano and a second fiddle. “Under the Double Eagle,” one of their recordings, became a country standard after the 1930s (McCuen 1962). The East Texas Serenaders received their name from the practice of traveling from farmhouse to farmhouse and standing in the yard entertaining the residents. The band, consisting of a fiddle, guitar, tenor banjo, and cello, recorded twenty-four songs for Columbia and Brunswick in the late 1920s (Hoepfner 1961). These groups from the Fort Worth area during the early and mid-1920s signaled the instrumental composition, repertoire format, and stylistic direction that the western swing bands in Fort Worth would eventually follow (Table 1).

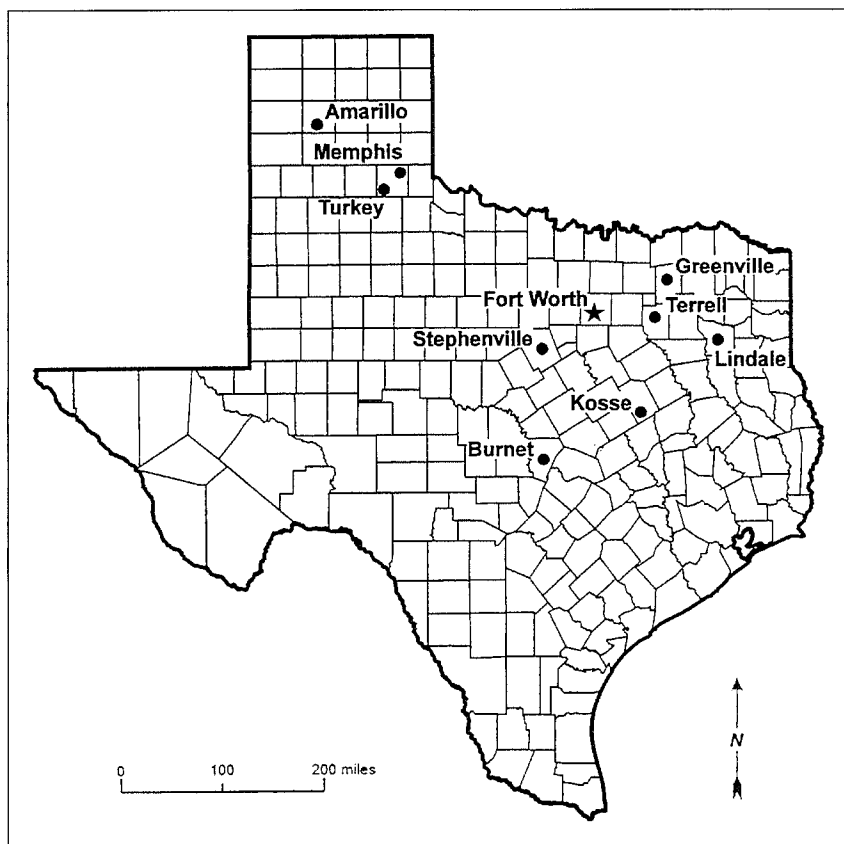


Figure 1. Important places in the origins of western swing.

### The Fort Worth Scene – Human Innovators and Place Incubator

Born in Kosse in Limestone County, Texas, in 1905, James Robert was the first of John and Emma Wills' twelve children. After their tenant farm failed, the Wills family moved in 1913 to West Texas, midway between Turkey and Memphis in Hall County, where they rented a small acreage on a 600-acre ranch (Figure 1). It was here at the age of ten that Bob joined his father in playing ranch dances and fiddle contests (Sheldon 1995). After completing barber school in Amarillo in

Table 1. Western swing genealogy (Early 1920s – 1933)

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Early and Mid-1920s .....	Prince Albert Hunt's Texas Ramblers Oscar and Doc Harper Humphries Brothers Bill Boyd's Cowboy Ramblers Solomon and Hughes East Texas Serenaders
1929 .....	Wills Fiddle Band
1930 .....	Aladdin Laddies
1931 .....	Light Crust Doughboys
1932 .....	Milton Brown and the Musical Brownies
1933 .....	Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys

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1927, Wills took the fourth chair at Ham's Barber Shop in Turkey. For the next two years, Wills' biographer notes, when he was not shaving a customer Wills played the fiddle to entertain the loafers (Townsend 1976). After being jailed for public drunkenness in his hometown of Turkey, an embarrassed Wills packed his belongings and headed for Fort Worth in 1929. Soon, he was barbering along Third Street in Fort Worth (Figure 2).

Armed with his fiddle, Wills found a couple of musicians in Fort Worth and formed "Doc's Medicine Show." While driving through the northeast part of Fort Worth, Herman Arnsperger, a local guitarist, noticed a crowd watching a medicine show with Wills playing the fiddle and singing. After the show, Arnsperger invited Wills to his apartment, where Wills convinced Arnsperger to join the medicine show. For the next two months, the show went on the road playing within a 50-mile radius of Fort Worth. It folded, however, just before Christmas in 1929.

Undaunted, Wills and Arnsperger formed the Wills Fiddle Band, an



Figure 2. Outlets for western swing in Fort Worth in 1930.

auspicious name for a band comprised of only two members. Because of Arnsperger's contacts, radio station KTAT, located in the Aviation Building in downtown Fort Worth (Figure 2), offered them a job performing at 6:30 a.m. six days a week. With the publicity of a daily broadcast, the Wills Fiddle Band received requests to play numerous house parties and "kitchen sweats" (country dances moved to town) in Fort Worth.

At one of these local dances, Wills met the Brown brothers, Milton and Durwood, natives of Stephenville, some sixty miles southwest of Fort Worth (Figure 1). After high school graduation, Milton worked as a cigar salesman in the Fort Worth area, while the younger Durwood was a Fort Worth high school student (Ginell 1994). At the party, Milton joined Wills on a chorus of "St. Louis Blues" and impressed Wills to hire him as vocalist for the Wills Fiddle Band. Durwood agreed to join the band as a guitarist, working around his school schedule. Thus, the Wills Fiddle Band doubled in size.

Continuing to play the Fort Worth house party circuit, the band was hired in the summer of 1930 to play every Saturday night at the Eagle's Lodge Hall on Fifth Street (between Main and Commerce) in downtown Fort Worth (Figure 2). To expand their repertoire, the band began listening to all types of music and made friends with Will Ed and Walter Kemble, owners of Kemble Brothers Furniture at 214 West Weatherford Street in downtown Fort Worth (Figure 2). In those days, furniture stores carried phonographs and records. Kemble's had the broadest selection of the newest releases, including blues, pop, and Dixieland jazz. The Kembles allowed the band to rehearse in their store and perform every Saturday for their customers (Townsend 1976). The Kembles also sponsored an occasional radio program listed as "Kemble Brothers Record Program," airing from 7:00 to 7:30 in the morning. This show advertised the store and its music selection by playing phonograph records (Ginell 1994).

Later in 1930, Wills won a fiddle contest sponsored by radio station KFJZ housed in Meacham's General Store, located at Twelfth and Main in downtown Fort Worth (Figure 2). KFJZ had a broadcast range of a mere fifteen miles because the transmitter was located at the edge of Fort Worth on top of a telephone pole (Healy 1962). The contest finals held in a Fort Worth park drew an estimated audience of 7,000, and was broadcast by the station. This enhanced Wills' reputation as the best



fiddler in the Fort Worth area.

With this newly-gained musical fame, Wills and his group were hired in late 1930 by radio station WBAP, located in the Blackstone Hotel at Fifth and Main in downtown Fort Worth (Figure 2). The Aladdin Lamp Company sponsored the show and the band soon renamed their group The Aladdin Laddies. The band was now on one of the most powerful and influential radio stations in the Southwest, thus spreading their music into new areas (Carney 1977). Moreover, the new program augmented their dance circuit schedule leading to a further boost in their musical careers.

Shortly after the WBAP program was launched, the Laddies were asked to perform at the Crystal Springs dance pavilion on White Settlement Road in Fort Worth (Willis 1959). With extended radio coverage, the band drew large crowds and, according to Townsend (1976), became the most popular dance band in the Fort Worth area. Crystal Springs became the focal point for dancing in Northeast Texas and attracted such notable customers as the infamous Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow. During the Crystal Springs and WBAP engagements, Wills added Sleepy Johnson on tenor banjo and Jesse Ashlock on second fiddle (Griffis 1972). It was while playing at Crystal Springs that Wills had sufficient musicians in his band to allow them to take improvisational choruses. The increased popularity of the Aladdin Laddies resulted in another opportunity for Wills and his band.

Burrus Mills, a Fort Worth industry known for its flour manufacturing, was located on Front Street, now Lancaster Avenue (Figure 2). It had begun investing a good deal of money advertising its major product, Light Crust Flour. Ed Kemble, the furniture store entrepreneur and friend of Wills and Arnsperger, persuaded Burrus Mills to sponsor a radio show featuring Wills and his band. This would entail a one-month trial program on radio station KFJZ. The show went on the air in early January 1931. Wills again renamed his band to The Light Crust

Doughboys, and the officials at Burrus Mills liked the catchy label.

After a few weeks on KFJZ, Burrus Mills' General Manager W. Lee O'Daniel (Douglas and Miller 1938) moved the show to WBAP and its prime noon-hour slot. The WBAP show achieved remarkable success. Six months after its debut on WBAP, it was broadcast over WOAI in San Antonio and KPRC in Houston. Eventually, it was aired over the Southwest Quality Network, which included several more stations in Texas and Oklahoma (Townsend 1976).

Early in 1932, the Doughboys recorded two sides for Victor Records in the Jefferson Hotel in Dallas. The band selected "Suebonnet Sue" and "Nancy Jane" for their first recording session. The record was released under the band name, Fort Worth Doughboys, because Burrus Mills refused to use the Light Crust brand name. It was the only recording made by the Doughboys, and the only one Wills ever made for Victor Records. Unfortunately, neither of the songs were successful hits. Burrus Mills, however, envisioned greater plans for the Doughboys.

O'Daniel, later elected as governor of Texas in 1938 and as United States Senator from Texas in 1941, assumed a more significant role in managing the band. He built a studio at the mill and furnished it with the latest phonographs and recordings. The band was expected to spend eight hours a day at the mill studio either rehearsing or learning new material. The Doughboys enjoyed the extra practice time and new facilities, but when O'Daniel ordered that the band stop playing dances, some of the members rebelled. Milton and Durwood Brown left the group in September 1932.

The Browns organized their own group, the Musical Brownies. This six-piece band began broadcasting over KTAT in Fort Worth, and rivaled the Light Crust Doughboys for the next year (Ginell 1994). The Brownies made several innovative contributions to the western swing sound. First, Milton Brown's singing set the stage for western swing vocalists, or "crooners." Second, Fred Calhoun, pianist, introduced jazz piano playing

to country music. Finally, Bob Dunn, steel guitarist, pioneered the electrification of the instrument and jazz improvisation to make it one of the dominant forces in today's country music (Coffey 1995).

Wills remained with the Light Crust Doughboys until August of 1933 when O'Daniel fired him over personnel matters and for missing several broadcasts because of bouts of heavy drinking. Wills moved his family to Waco where he reassembled the band as the Texas Playboys. The Playboys soon began broadcasting over radio station WACO. By the end of 1933, the Texas Playboys left Waco for Oklahoma City and later moved to Tulsa. This completed the development of "western swing" genealogy in Texas from the early 1920s to the early 1930s, a decade of innovative music in the Fort Worth area.

### Western Swing—First "Alternative" Form of Country Music

Western swing dramatically changed the course of country music as the first "alternative" sub-genre. Six elements of the style summarize the innovations that sprang from the culture hearth of Fort Worth.

First and foremost western swing was rhythmic and infectious dance music, heretofore absent from country music. Numerous country music legends, such as Merle Travis and Ernest Tubb, described western swing as the first sound to put a beat in country music and made it danceable (Townsend 1976; Pugh 1996).

Second, western swing featured an eclectic repertory different from the mountain music of the southeastern United States. It reflected the diverse mingling of musical cultures in the Southwest—German and Czech polkas of the Texas Hill Country, African-American blues from East Texas, cowboy ballads of West Texas, and the Mexican-American *mariachi* strains from the Rio Grande Valley.

Third, western swing incorporated every jazz idiom in its musical structure, including blue notes, syncopation, and above all, improvisa-

tion. It produced jazz with traditional country instruments. Because of these influences, it was first called “western jazz” before the term “western swing” was coined in Tulsa.

Fourth, western swing was a pragmatic music—an uninhibited, experimental, and radical approach that was more concerned with musical feeling than musical propriety. Western swing was a music that created an atmosphere of happiness with its 2/4 danceable beat, jazz choruses, syncopation, and extemporaneous improvisation. It was an avenue of escapism for those living through the 1929 Wall Street crash and the Great Depression of the 1930s. It has often been said that Bob Wills never allowed his music to be put in a straitjacket. It conformed to nothing but human feeling. Wills’ “ahhaa,” like a folk cry, became an ecstatic expression of musical emotion that became a part of the music itself. As Johnny Gimble, veteran fiddler and former Texas Playboy, said, “western swing musicians never played a tune the same way twice” (Townsend 1976, 60).

Fifth, western swing was never fully embraced by Nashville and the country music industry. With only one appearance on the Grand Ole Opry, western swing bands were considered musical heretics by the country music establishment. Neither Milton Brown nor Bob Wills was ever asked to join the Grand Ole Opry. When Wills placed drums on the stage of the Ryman at his one and only Grand Ole Opry appearance, Opry officials considered canceling his engagement. Betty Wills declared in 1968 when Bob was unexpectedly elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame, “Nashville didn’t think Bob was part of Nashville, past or present. That was the way they felt. On the other hand, Bob never felt he was part of the Grand Ole Opry” (Townsend 1976, 283).

Finally, Fort Worth provided the cultural context for the origin and evolution of western swing. This culturally peripheral cow town in Northeast Texas contributed the musical infrastructure consisting of house parties, dance halls, and radio stations to produce this unique style of

country music. It was an unlikely music center. Fort Worth is located some 700 miles southwest of Nashville, home of the Grand Ole Opry, and approximately 1,000 miles from Camden, New Jersey, and New York City, centers of the earliest country music recordings. It became, from 1929 to 1933, what music scholars have called the “cradle of western swing,” the culture hearth of the first “alternative” country music form.

## Conclusions

Musicologists have documented the origin of several American music genres. Examples include rockabilly in Memphis, Motown in Detroit, jazz in New Orleans, urban blues in the south side of Chicago, bebop in New York City’s 52<sup>nd</sup> Street, rap in the Bronx, and grunge in Seattle. It is apparent that the genesis of western swing is similar in nature. The locally based western swing subculture in the Fort Worth area was the culture hearth for the distinctive elements of the western swing sound. It is clear that the defining characteristics were created and shaped by the musicians and vocalists in and around Fort Worth. Moreover, the network of social institutions (Crystal Springs dance pavilion, Eagle’s Lodge Hall, Kemble Brothers Furniture Store, and Burrus Mills studio) and radio stations (KTAT, KFJZ, and WBAP) in Fort Worth resulted in a music infrastructure that gave these innovative musicians an opportunity to produce a locally based sound that eventually achieved national recognition.

Cultural geographers are obligated to investigate the source areas of culture traits, innovations, and ideas, including music, in the Sauerian culture hearth tradition. Similarly, music geographers, a sub-field of cultural geography, are compelled to assist our sister disciplines (e.g., music history, folklore, and ethnomusicology) in unraveling geography-based inquiries relevant to the origins of American music sounds.

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