



# TUNE FUL TEXAS

From Western Swing to 'Conjunto',  
Texas music resists labeling.

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f you were to ask a non-Texan—a New Englander, let's say—to sum up Texas music, how do you think they'd respond?

Bill Dubiel, a Massachusetts native and longtime resident of Cape Cod, answered the question somewhat predictably: "Off the top of my head, I'd say country-western, line-dancing... a bunch of people having a really good time."

His response was typical because, even among many natives, the notion of what stamps a specific sound as being Texan is often rooted in the western swing/country-western stereotypes with which the state has long been associated. It's not to suggest, however, that country-western hasn't created its own magic and mythology, or its permanent place in the Lone Star state's musical identity. In fact, it's beloved among Texans and outsiders alike as one of Texas' richest musical traditions.

Here in 2013, however, even a cursory glimpse at popular music reveals that the innovative sonic "stew" called Texas music is far more varied and complex than that stereotype allows. Western swing, jazz, mariachi, zydeco, Tejano, conjunto, punk rock, alt-rock, rock and roll, religious, gothic, industrial, outlaw... the list of musical genres that have come to be identified with the state is nearly endless.



TOP LEFT: Rudy Vallee. ABOVE: The Texas Top Hands bus on its perch outside The Broken Spoke in Austin. BOTTOM LEFT: Billy Mata carries on the Texas Tradition of Western swing.

## CULTURALLY SIGNIFICANT

Deirdre Lannon, a history professor at Texas State University in San Marcos, is something of an authority on the topic. Professor Lannon teaches cultural history that, as she describes it, is diffused "through the lens of music."

"I think Texas has a tradition of being a 'cultural signifier,' and the music of Texas carries that tradition forward through time, and out into the world," she says, noting that Texas' vastness as a state and its ethnic diversity are important keys to the number and quality of its many musical influences.

"All the various immigrant populations throughout Texas—and I include Native Americans because they immigrated from somewhere originally as well—have had enormous interplay with one another. Different groups have brought their various traditions to this region, and I think, have come together in a pretty unique way."

At some point, Lannon believes the power structure in Texas made a conscious decision to identify the state with the mythic West. "Right around the centennial, there was a push to disassociate Texas with its agricultural past—and instead to associate it with a western ethos. And that ethos was characterized by Anglo men on horses and in cowboy hats."

## FROM JAZZ TO SWING

Western swing is not true western music, Lannon opines. "At its heart is this idea of the great mythologized, romanticized, open-range cowboy who captivated the American imagination—and Texas became the focal point for that mythology." She points out, for instance, that western swing icons Bob Wills and Milton Brown, when they first got together, were jazz musicians. "They were wearing suits and fedoras and listening to blues and jazz. And they were listening

BELOW: Honky-tonk music pioneer Ernest Tubb laughs with James White in the early days of The Broken Spoke in Austin.



BELOW: The guitar auction at the annual Gruene Music and Wine Festival sports guitars autographed by musical greats—from traditional Country to modern day Americana.



to pop crooners like Rudy Vallee, and old Appalachian fiddle breakdowns, and I think [these influences] are the perfect exemplar of Texas' musical roots. They [the musical artists] put it together to create a pretty distinctive sound that is uniquely Texan."

Laurie Jasinski, a research editor for the Texas State Historical Association, agrees. "The early jazz musicians coming out of Houston, San Antonio and other localities were all major influences, leading up to the emergence of western swing on the radio up in Fort Worth," she says. "Luckily, at the same time as some of these developments, you have the beginnings of an early recording industry that captured and preserved some of these influential musical roots."

Texas' music is a "regional construct" Lannon notes. "The current borders of the state were established in 1850, but the musical heritage and cultural traditions of the people reach back much, much further than that." The unique political and governmental

## TEXAS-BORN STARS

They may not be country but they're Texas-bred.

**Roy Orbison** 1936  
"Pretty Woman"

**Janis Joplin** 1943  
"Me and Bobby McGee"

**Barry White** 1944  
"Can't Get Enough of Your Love"

**Meat Loaf** 1974  
"I'd Do Anything for Love"

**Nelly** 1974  
"Country Grammar"

**Jessica Simpson** 1980  
"I Think I'm in Love with You"

**Beyoncé Knowles** 1981  
"Crazy in Love"

**Kelly Clarkson** 1982  
"Since U Been Gone"

**Ryan Cabrera** 1982  
"On the Way Down"



history of Texas has created a 'cultural mystique'. Our borders are porous, not hard and fast," she believes.

## AUSTIN TO THE CORE

No study of Texas music would be complete without discussing how prominently Austin figures into the mix of things. One of the most significant musical hubs in the U.S., the state capital has become a point of pilgrimage for thousands of musicians and songwriters through the years.

Lannon thinks the reasons for Austin being identified for exceptional music are threefold. "First, the people who govern the state understand what an important cultural export Texas music is. And Austin is a college town with a lot of young people who migrated here in the post-rock 'n' roll era. Popular music became identified with 'youth.' Thirdly, the hippie rockers and the conservative, good-old-boy population known—sometimes disparagingly and sometimes lovingly—as 'rednecks,' merged to create this hybrid culture where a brand of 'outlaw country' was being played. Artists like Willie Nelson felt constricted in other musical centers like Nashville, so they moved to Austin and brought their own brand of music to the wide-open Texas plains."

Jasinski agrees, adding that Austin's famous Sixth Street area of clubs and music venues has helped increase the city's legendary reputation as an ever-



Formerly Pecan Street, Austin's Sixth Street remains a hub for live music.

burgeoning music scene. "I think it really got started in the late '60s and early '70s, when you had the 'redneck rock' movement or progressive country—maybe with a little bit of what was the last vestige of psychedelia. Then, there was opening of Armadillo Music World Headquarters [in Austin], which, between 1970 and 1980, was a much-heralded mecca for live music." All of these factors in the decade leading up to the 1980s have helped Austin solidify its reputation as one of the most progressive centers for popular music

in the country, Jasinski says.

Add to it the development of South by Southwest (SXSW), the big music festival that takes place every March, which has galvanized Austin's musical street cred. "That [event] has grown to such international stature over the last two or more decades that it's really propelled Austin's reputation as the live music capital of the world," Jasinski says. "So many pioneers and pivotal moments in music, all of them originating in Texas . . . it's remarkable."



ABOVE: Willie Nelson and owner of The Broken Spoke, James White—circa 1968. LEFT: The Broken Spoke in 1964, the year that it opened. To this day it remains an iconic music venue and dance hall in Austin.





The crowd sings along with Texas-born country music star Bart Crow at Bootfest 2012.



Many with wine in hand, the crowd gathers 'round the music stage at Gruene Music and Wine Fest 2012.



The Boss, Bruce Springsteen plays to a crowd of elated fans at 2012's SXSW.

# FALL MUSIC FESTIVALS

## Blues, Brew & BBQ

Sept. 28, Kemah

After a 10-year hiatus—Blues, Brews & BBQ is back as Kemah Boardwalk presents a menu of live music by the hottest local Blues musicians, with a side of good ole Texas barbecue and brew. [kemahboardwalk.com](http://kemahboardwalk.com)

## Bootfest

Oct. 4-5, Victoria

Relatively new on the festival map, Bootfest will pack De Leon Plaza for its third year, with nationally acclaimed music of all sorts on two stages, a classic car show, artisans, and of course, custom boot makers. [visitvictoriatexas.com](http://visitvictoriatexas.com)

## Gruene Music and Wine Fest

Oct. 10-13, New Braunfels

Wine enthusiasts and music lovers alike are sure to flock to Gruene Historic District to enjoy old world wines and old school country with performances by Emmylou Harris and Rodney Crowell. [gruenemusicandwinefest.org](http://gruenemusicandwinefest.org)

## Rockport Seafair

Oct. 11-13, Rockport

From Mark Chesnutt to '80s cover band the Spazmatics, Rockport Harbor will be rocking with something for everyone. This festival also plays host to the South Texas Finals of the Texaco Country Music Showdown. [rockportseafair.com](http://rockportseafair.com)

## Texas Jazz Festival

Oct. 18-20, Corpus Christi

With three stages set up among the historic homes of Heritage Park, the Texas Jazz Festival will jam for its 53rd year, making it one of the longest running jazz festivals in the nation. [texasjazz-fest.org](http://texasjazz-fest.org)