EARLY INFLUENCES

BOB WILLS AND HIS TEXAS PLAYBOYS

Bob Wills (second from right) with some of His Texas Playboys in the early 1950s

Years before Sam Phillips envisioned a new frontier in the sound of Elvis Presley's voice, Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys were out there cutting the path that would run through Memphis, merge with other musical byways in the mid-1950s and lead ultimately to rock & roll. Bob Wills, the King of Western Swing, was all over early rock & roll, and it's entirely appropriate that he is honored tonight for his pioneering achievements in laying the groundwork for what many believe is

BY DAVID McGEE

Top: Wills, in Ponca City, Oklahoma, 1940; Right: with horse Punkin in Tulsa, 1940; performing in 1944 with the Playboys, featuring vocalist Tommy Duncan, at the Aragon Ballroom in Oceanpark, California

the most important popular-culture phenomenon of the century.

In fact, Wills's spirit, if not invoked by name, is nevertheless more powerfully felt today than it has been in years. It's easy to detect its presence in the early days – every time Carl Perkins cries out something on the order of "Go, cat, go!" in one of his songs, he's tipping his hat to Bob Wills; and in Chuck Berry's guitar solos you can hear some of the tricks Berry picked up from Wills's guitarist Eldon Shamblin – but what about today? One need look no further than Medeski, Martin and Wood, whose sets typically also quote from, oh, Duke Ellington, John Coltrane, Dr. John, Jimi Hendrix, classical iconoclast Charles Ives and Mississippi Fred McDowell. Or take the young swing bands filling dance halls across the nation with the very same blend of jazz-influenced Western swing and traditional big-band swing that Wills and the Playboys perfected. And then consider this comment Wills made in 1944: "We're hep. We're the most versatile band in America. Sure we give 'em Western music . . . but we give 'em rhumbas, too. And when there are jitterbugs in the joint, we get 'em so happy they can't stay on the floor." Obviously what was good fifty-five years ago strikes a responsive chord today, at least with any musician who dares to be different.

From his first recording sessions in 1935 to the epochal 1940 session that produced landmarks such as "New San Antonio Rose" (is there a lyric in any type of song more beautiful than Wills's own incandescent "Lips so sweet and tender/Like petals falling apart"?) to his last productive sessions in the early Sixties, Wills was about change and movement, his band shrinking and expanding as trends changed, his music taking on brilliant new hues and scintillating, unexpected textures in his drive to keep it fresh and edgy. To achieve his ambitious agenda, Wills recruited some of the best musicians America had to offer, including Shamblin; Shamblin's predecessor, Herman Arnspiger; wild-eyed and rocking piano player Al Stricklin; and two unqualified giants of their disciplines, steel guitarist Leon McAuliffe (whose own "Steel Guitar Rag" became that instrument's *Hamlet*) and peerless

vocalist Tommy Duncan, who also contributed several Playboys evergreens as Wills's cowriter. Disdaining conventional definitions, Wills reconfigured country music's Western swing offshoot to a degree previously unimagined – he was not the father of that style, but he became its most prominent practitioner, its reigning visionary and its conscience.

Top: Wills and His Playboys in the 1940s; Left: Wills at his sixtieth-birthday gig at Dewey Groom's Longhorn Ranch in Dallas, March 6, 1965; with singers Duncan and Laura Lee, 1944

I grew up in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Wills's home base for many years. I remember, when I was a child, how eagerly the adults in our neighborhood – all blue-collar, manual-labor types – looked forward to Saturday, because it meant Leon McAuliffe would be visiting our homes by way of his local afternoon TV show. And then in the evening, Wills and the Playboys would be holding forth as usual downtown at Cain's Dancing Academy. On those nights everyone came home energized, not because they'd had too much to drink (well, some surely had) but because the music gave life, and some hope, to people whose everyday routines were otherwise full of desperation, struggle and, sometimes, violence. During that same period I recall Fats Domino being interviewed on TV and defending rock & roll by observing, ever so kindly, that "far as I can see music makes people happy." In that moment, rock & roll pioneer Fats Domino and Bob Wills, King of Western Swing, were one. ✵