

The Fiddling of Bob Wills

By Stacy Phillips

Bob Wills occupies a distinctive niche in American fiddle annals. To many in the Southwest he is still “the king.” Otherwise knowledgeable old time fiddlers don’t even know he was an expert in that genre and grew up in the tradition. Still others think he played the swing solos on Texas Playboys recordings. (He did not.)

Wills is one of very few in both the Rock and Roll and Country Music Halls of Fame. He inspired countless imitators, from Merle Haggard to Tommy Jackson and most every Texas and Nashville fiddler in the mid-20th century. Merle Haggard’s *Tribute to the Best Damn Fiddler in the World* inspired a Wills renaissance in the 1970s (and introduced Johnny Gimble to the greater fiddle world). Haggard even learned to play a credible version of Wills’ style (see link #1 at fiddle.com/Tune-sound-video-files.page).

This article highlights the breadth of Wills’ fiddle repertoire and some characteristics of his playing style. Please refer to fiddle.com/Tune-sound-video-files.page to listen to many examples.

Background

James Robert Wills was born March 6, 1905, near Kosse, Limestone County, Texas, and died May 13, 1975. The genesis of all the peculiarities of his approach is a matter of conjecture, though much of it certainly came from his extended family. Many older relatives were fiddlers and there seem to have been many pieces that were unique to them.

Bob’s father “Uncle John” Wills (1880-1952), who was born in Oklahoma, was likely his strongest influence. Both father and grandfather insisted on his using the full bow as opposed to what was referred to as the “jiggy” bowing of the Southeast. Bob eventually developed even smoother bowing than his relatives.

Uncle John was a respected contest and dance fiddler. When challenged at the former, he sometimes would tune up as much as three half-steps to make his fiddle sound more brilliant. He reportedly would holler a fiddle-sounding harmony during his contest rounds in order to fool the judges and audience (whose reaction often figured into scoring) into thinking he was playing double stops.

Bob Wills started on mandolin, chording for his father at ranch house dances when he was as young as six. Often, after a day of picking cotton, his father would bring him along to dances that lasted well past midnight. Quoting Bob, “I’d be playing with



Photo courtesy of OKPOP Museum & Estate of Bob Wills

blood running down that little mandolin.” At around 11 years of age his father didn’t show, and Bob played his first solo dance.

Traveling to dances and contests with his father, Bob heard greats like Eck Robertson and Red Steeley. This was the fiddle environment in which Bob Wills grew up.

Along with his father and brothers, Bob would often hire out to pick cotton for local farmers. Working alongside Afro-Americans, Bob heard a lot of blues in an area that was a cradle of that genre. He acknowledged that hearing his black neighbors singing during and after work had a profound effect on the way he played and the repertoire of his Texas Playboys. He considered blues to be a fundamental aspect of his fiddling and the way he handled slides to be a reflection of this. A probably apocryphal story has it that he once rode 50 miles on horseback to see Bessie Smith perform. It is true that his first recording was one of her tunes (though unissued).

When he barbered (an occupation that famously allows plenty of time to fiddle between haircuts) in New Mexico around 1927, Wills heard Mexican string bands and he played for and with Mexicans. While not as strong an influence on his fiddling as his family and local blues, it resulted in tunes he eventually recorded, like “Spanish Two Step” (and thus “San Antonio Rose”), and his penchant for multiple, harmonized fiddles.

Returning to Texas, Wills worked in medicine shows, one of which already had a “Jim” in the cast. The manager chose to use Wills’ middle name and thus he became “Bob,” which stuck. Much of his stage persona was established during this period. He learned how to grab and keep an audience’s attention.



Bob Wills dance, California, c. 1944. Left to right: Louis Tierney (fiddle), Bob Wills (fiddle), Tommy Duncan (vocals), Rip Ramsey (bass), unidentified trumpeter, Tiny Mott (saxophone).

Photo courtesy of OKPOP Museum & Estate of Bob Wills

The Fiddling

Because his band, the Texas Playboys, was the most influential western swing group for so long, many fans assume that Wills was a jazz-type fiddler.¹ To the contrary, it seems that he always worked out his solos in advance and they were not melodically advanced or rhythmically adventurous. He never learned to improvise, though he wished he could.

However, his style is unique and recognizable within a few seconds (unless you are listening to an imitator). His tune settings are creative, delivered with smooth bowing and, often, metric crookedness. One anecdote gives evidence of the last quality. Cecil Brower, one of the greats of western swing fiddle, reportedly had a very short stint with the Texas Playboys when he had the effrontery to question Wills' rhythmic quirkiness in front of the rest of the band. When Wills soloed, you played with him – Wills did not play with you.

His repertoire included an amazing variety of tune types. His first available recording, from 1932, was with the Fort Worth Doughboys (named for a sponsor).² This quartet was a sort of proto-western swing band. Over the years, Bob's fiddling on pop tunes like "Nancy Jane" didn't change much from this recording with Milton Brown's vocal and two rhythm guitars. His six(!) solos are identical and it is a stretch to find any classic swing elements. (See link #2 at fiddle.com/Tune-sound-video-files.page.)

The first recording of the Texas Playboys was a Wills deconstruction of a Memphis Jug Band piece titled "Ruckus Juice and Chit-

¹ The term "western swing" was introduced in the late 1940s. On record labels his music was referred to as "hot string band."

² A 1929 pressing was never released and has been lost.

tlins" (see link #3 at fiddle.com/Tune-sound-video-files.page). In 1935 Wills coined it "Osage Stomp" and changed the key from D to F. This kind of Afro-American-derived hokum was as close as Wills came to fiddling in a jazz style.³

Just two days later he recorded "Smith's Reel" as a straight hoe-down accompanied only by Sleepy Johnson's guitar. This is probably how Wills sounded at dances in his teen years; right in the rhythmic pocket, smooth, long bow strokes but few slurs. This "saw" bowing was probably typical of his southwestern peers but atypical of most of his later recorded solos. Wills played no variations to speak of (except when recovering from a mistake about two-thirds of the way through).

More typical of his bowing is one of the band's most popular fiddle pieces, "Ida Red" (see 8:10 in link #4 at fiddle.com/Tune-sound-video-files.page). He begins his first A section with a down bow but the other sections with up bows! Even though the rhythm is laying down a swing groove, the fiddling is straight southwest old time.⁴ There are plenty of slurred passages with an occasional measure of sawing. Typically the band adds floating, often nonsense, verses and hot solos that relate to the chords, not to the melody.

Though the music on this clip was likely recorded prior to filming, Wills seldom varied his playing, so you are likely watching an accurate example of his bowing as well as his manic, hyper-

³ At this point the Texas Playboys could not be called a swing band in that their rhythm was in the 2/4 meter of 1920s jazz, not that of the then-current style of, for example, Count Basie.

⁴ This kind of accompaniment led to the guitar playing style at current Texas-derived fiddle contests.

jive-y and beloved stage character. His playing often involved much body language and occasional violin wiggling.

Wills seems to have employed the upper half of his bow almost exclusively. He often used (counting in cut time) multiple, consecutive bow strokes of 1/4 to dotted 1/4 note duration, including two or three notes per stroke, but with occasional strokes of longer duration. These slurs were not random. Changes of bow directions often happened on off beats, adding a subtle syncopation to the flow of notes. Occasionally there were two or three consecutive strokes of dotted 1/4 note length, the classic country hemiola. There are many passages of sawing but these long bows and their metric placement are crucial to his distinctive sound.

Check out his idiosyncratic version of “Wake Up Susan,” aka “Jack of Diamonds,” at around 6:35 in the same clip as “Ida Red” (link #4 at fiddle.com/Tune-sound-video-files.page). (Thanks to Vivian Williams and Howard Marshall for the identification.) “Wake Up Susan” segues into a double fiddle “Liberty.” Note how Joe Holley was able to synchronize his bowing with Wills’. Though eccentric, Wills is consistent. You can see that Holley is paying attention to Wills’ bow direction. Pretty cool, especially considering that Holley is playing a right-handed violin from the left-hand side!

Wills performed one of his family tunes, “Gone Indian,” in his first film appearance in 1940 and his exuberance is at its most frenzied⁵ (at 26:30 in link #5 at fiddle.com/Tune-sound-video-files.page).

“Gone Indian” was one of his fiddle tunes that Wills converted (probably with a lot of help from guitarist Eldon Shamblin) to a hit song, “Stay All Night, Stay a Little Longer” (58:35 of the same clip: link #5 at fiddle.com/Tune-sound-video-files.page). The key is transposed from D to G but the fingering is similar to “Gone Indian,” just one string lower.⁶

Then there are “cowboy blues” like “Bob

⁵ The producers allowed only about half of the Playboys in this movie.

⁶ At 6:20 of this same video is a short clip of a square dance in 1930 New Mexico – an authentic glimpse into the fiddle/guitar style of Wills’ milieu.

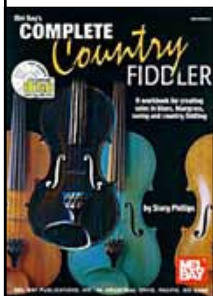
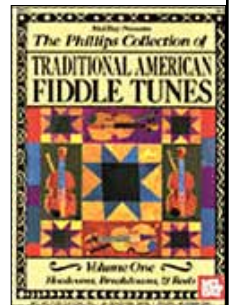
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Western Swing Fiddle. Available as a download with recordings of all the music in the book (contains many Wills solos). The only book with the complete scoop on the fiddle styles in western swing. Transcriptions and analyses of the great solos and tunes, featuring the music of Bob Wills, J.R. Chatwell, Hugh Farr, Keith Coleman, Louis Tierney, Joe Holley, Cliff Bruner, Bobby Bruce, Buddy Ray, Spade Cooley, Jesse Ashlock, Cecil Brower, Cotton Thompson, Curt Massey, Darrell Kirkpatrick, Don Dekker, Buddy Spicher, etc., and a whole chapter of Johnny Gimble solos, many with multiple versions. Interviews with Johnny Gimble, Joe Holley, Cliff Bruner, Bobby Bruce...

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(contains many Wills fiddle tune transcriptions). An unprecedented compendium of 800 fiddle tunes in all the major categories of American traditional fiddle styles – hoedowns, breakdowns and reels – each entry based on the playing of an outstanding fiddler (over 300 different players represented) including Emmett Lundy, Benny Thomasson, Doc Roberts, Bob Walters, Howdy Forrester, James Bryan, Clark Kessinger, Rodney Miller, Tommy Jarrell, Alan Jabbour, Ruthie Dornfeld, Tommy Jackson, Buddy Thomas, Bruce Molsky, Ed Haley, Bob Wills, Marcus Martin, Byron Berline, Paul Warren, Melvin Wine, Kenny Baker, Eck Robertson, Clyde Davenport, J. P. Fraley, Cyril Stinnett, Hugh Farr, Lynn Smith, Leonard Rutherford, Leake County Revelers, Joe Politte, Wilson Douglas, Brad Leftwich, Major Franklin, Judy Hyman, John Hartford, Pete Sutherland, etc., with multiple versions of many tunes. Bowing, fingering, and chordal accompaniment included.



Complete Country Fiddler. Available as a download, with mp3 recordings (contains a discussion of the Wills-influenced country fiddle style). Learn how to create authentic licks and solos in the major modern fiddle styles of blues, swing, bluegrass and commercial country; this book shows what the top players are really doing. 300 examples plus many full solos with extensive commentary and explanations. “Fiddle Sticks” (Dale Potter’s Boogie), several versions of “Careless Love,” “Pig in the Pen,” “The Wild Side of Life,” “Draggin’ the Bow,” “Corrine Corrina,” etc. Most tunes set in several keys. 11 interviews with top players including Buddy Spicher, Mark O’Connor, Hoot Hester, Vassar Clements, John Hartford, Dale Potter and the top studio cats from Nashville and New York; in depth looks at Tommy Jackson, Dale Potter and Johnny Gimble. Chapters on music theory for fiddlers and fiddle amplification.

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Photo courtesy of OKPOP Museum & Estate of Bob Wills

Twin fiddles: left-handed fiddler Joe Holley and Bob Wills, mid-'40s

Wills Special,” which exhibits some of the characteristics that were later adapted by commercial fiddlers. Where did this come from? I have only heard this sort of lonesome feel from Wills. It is not in blues form and has only a few blues notes, but it certainly is bluesy. And, boy, are his solos ever crooked!

Bob takes the first and last solos and lead on the twin fiddle section, with either Jesse Ashlock or Louis Tierney harmonizing. (See link #6 at fiddle.com/Tune-sound-video-files.page.)

Through the years, Wills kicked off many Texas Playboys recordings that were otherwise in pop, blues, and country genres; always sounding like the eccentric, hip Southwest old time fiddler he was, never like a jazz fiddler. For fine examples listen to “Never No More Blues,” “Who Walks In When I Walk Out,” “Old Fashioned Love,” “Sitting on Top of the World,” “What’s the Matter Mill,” “Rockin’ Alone,” “Right or Wrong,” and many more.

Above all, Wills’ name is indelibly connected with three fiddle tunes: “San Antonio Rose,” “Maiden’s Prayer,” and “Faded Love.”

His “Spanish Two Step” is the precursor to “San Antonio Rose.” Wills claimed that he just reversed the two sections of the former to create “Rose.” He adapted “Spanish Two Step” from the Mexican music he heard in New Mexico (see link #7 at fiddle.com/Tune-sound-video-files.page). The original “Rose” is an instrumental. Lyrics were later added in a successful attempt to increase record sales. Check out the similarity of Leon McAuliffe’s steel guitar solos on the two cuts (link #8 at fiddle.com/Tune-sound-video-files.page).

“Maiden’s Prayer” is a Wills family tune apparently inspired by a classical piano piece by Tekla Badarzewska. (Alternately, both might have had the same, earlier folk source.) (For the Wills

version, see link #9 at fiddle.com/Tune-sound-video-files.page. An art music version is available at link #10.)

Third is “Faded Love,” seemingly derived from the mid-19th century pop song “Darling Nelly Gray” (see link #11 at fiddle.com/Tune-sound-video-files.page). This clip, probably from the late 1940s (the Playboys recorded “Faded Love” several times), illustrates the attributes that commercial country fiddlers adapted in the 1950s. Wills plays both sections, though separated by a vocal. (The single fiddle background fills were probably by Joe Holley.)

Besides his overall fiddle groove, Nashville fiddlers picked up on Wills’ penchant for “hammer-on”-like fingering, typically, a slurred F#-A on the D string, often with a droned open A string and similarly

fingered moves on other strings. They also incorporated his mordant-like embellishments and the way he would interrupt notes of long duration with a note a scale step above and quickly return to the original pitch. For an example of the latter, listen to the middle of the B section solo of “Faded Love,” where an E note is embellished with a couple of short F#s. Notice how much slower the last two pieces are now played. Lyrics were added after these three instrumentals were popularized by the Texas Playboys. (“Bob Wills Special,” “San Antonio Rose,” “Maiden’s Prayer,” and “Faded Love” are transcribed in *Western Swing Fiddle*.)

With all the hot solos by others in his band, it is significant that the Texas Playboys’ most popular pieces were based on the Wills repertoire of straight fiddle tunes. (“Take Me Back to Tulsa” is yet another example: link #12 at fiddle.com/Tune-sound-video-files.page.) The band figured out a way to play traditional fiddle in a setting that made them popular with a much greater audience – as music for the popular dances of the 1930s and ’40s.

The country and western take on Wills is worth exploring a bit. The story goes that Ray Price (who grew up in Texas) was trying to solidify the new rhythm groove in his band (the so-called “Ray Price beat”). He buttonholed Tommy Jackson for an all-night session of experimentation and imbibing and came up with a Wills-inspired style that served as the bedrock of commercial country fiddling for a couple of decades.

Tommy Jackson’s playing on “My Shoes Keep Walking Back to You” is an early illustration. Check out his backup fills at link #13 at fiddle.com/Tune-sound-video-files.page. (Re-listen to “Faded Love” to hear the similarities in approach.)

Creative fiddlers added their own ideas, but Bob Wills is recognized as its source. Shorty Lavender’s solos and backup on “Heart
(Article continues on page 10.)

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over Mind” are acknowledged as a pinnacle of the style (link #14 at fiddle.com/Tune-sound-video-files.page). (By the way, that’s a young Buddy Emmons on the pedal steel – at that time, a still-developing invention.) Thirty years after this recording, when I interviewed Benny Martin and Buddy Spicher, they had no problem playing Lavender’s solo note-for-note!

Finally, a dessert of two more cool ones, beginning with link #15 at fiddle.com/Tune-sound-video-files.page. This clip has four more Wills fiddle tunes but I want to draw attention to the fifth, “Carolina in the Morning,” as only Bob could deliver (10:20 of the clip). A pop tune morphed into a fiddle tune! (The take-off fiddler is Jesse Ashlock.) Could this be anyone but the great Bob Wills?!

And give a listen to an audio clip of a radio broadcast from the mid-1950s (link #16 at fiddle.com/Tune-sound-video-files.page). It opens with a double-fiddle Texas Playboys theme. After that comes his version of “Eighth of January” (at about 1:26 of the clip). Despite his spoken reservations, the groove is eminently danceable. Can you imagine the atmosphere at a Texas Playboys dance?

I hope this short survey will spark an interest in the fiddle of Bob Wills and we will begin to hear some of his versions at old time jam sessions. Of course, there were many great swing fiddlers

who spent time as a Texas Playboy. Guys like Jesse Ashlock, Joe Holley, Louis Tierney, Keith Coleman, and Johnny Gimble should be on your “must listen” list. But that is worth an entire book.

[Stacy Phillips is a Grammy-winning fiddler and dobroist. His many instructional books and downloads are available on his web site at stacyphillips.com/fiddlebooks.html and stacyphillips.com/downloads.html. On dobro he is known for his instantly recognizable style. He began to teach himself violin in his late 20s and has been struggling to catch up to his younger students ever since.]

Sources:

Most of the biographical information comes from the first three references that follow, all highly recommended.

- *San Antonio Rose: The Life and Times of Bob Wills*, by Charles Townsend, with the story of his amazing life and musical achievements
- *Milton Brown and the Founding of Western Swing*, by Cary Ginell, with lots of information about the first western swing fiddlers
- *The Devil’s Box*, by Charles Wolfe, consisting of short biographies of many commercially recorded fiddlers of the 20th century

For more transcriptions and technical discussion, the following books should be useful.

- *Western Swing Fiddle*, by Stacy Phillips
- *Complete Country Fiddler* (interviews section), by Stacy Phillips
- *Contest Fiddling*, by Stacy Phillips

Most of Bob Wills’ recordings are available in the magnificent Bear Family CD/DVD box set titled *San Antonio Rose*.

Smith’s Reel

Transcribed by Stacy Phillips as played by Bob Wills in 1935.

◀ Listen at link #17 at fiddle.com/Tune-sound-video-files.page

Wills meant this recording to accompany square dancing.

Sleepy Johnson’s expert accompaniment is worthy of note but beyond the scope of this article.

From the Phillips Collection of Traditional American Fiddle Tunes - Volume 1 by Stacy Phillips

Notes on the transcriptions – specialized symbols:

- The diagonal lines are slides of indeterminate length. There is no duration of the pitch at the beginning of such a slide. The finger is moving as it touches the string.
- Jagged lines indicate slides between definite pitches, both with measurable durations.
- The upwards arrow means the pitch is actually a bit north of what is indicated.

The Bob Wills Heritage Foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization established in 2008 to further Bob Wills' legacy. Currently, the Heritage Foundation sanctions the annual Bob Wills Fiddle Festival and Contest in Greenville, Texas, the Bob Wills Day Fiddle Contest in Turkey, Texas, and Bob Wills Divisions in the Colorado Old-time Fiddlers' Association State Fiddle Championships in Denver and the Oklahoma State Fiddle Championships in Tulsa. For more information about Bob Wills and the Heritage Foundation, visit bobwills.com.

Osage Stomp

Transcribed by Stacy Phillips as played by Bob Wills on a 1949 recording made for radio broadcast.

◀ Listen at link #18 at fiddle.com/Tune-sound-video-files.page

This solo demonstrates some of Wills' characteristic moves: long bows, no bow shuffles, extra (but not random) beats in certain measures, fingered double stops, and no fear of upper positions (here, second). The slides to A, Ab, E, and Eb notes are drawn out and reach various intermediate pitches. This treatment of 3rd and b7th degrees of chords is typical of Wills' blues playing. It sounds like the band was unsure of when to change chords. So use this notation as a guide, not a gospel! Only the repeat of the recording's first section is transcribed in this notation.

♩ = 125
no chord

6 B \flat F

10 C7

15 1. F 2. F

19

24 B \flat F

29 C7 F

From *Western Swing Fiddle*, by Stacy Phillips

That Brownskin Gal

aka "There's a Brownskin Gal Down the Road Somewhere." Transcribed by Stacy Phillips as played by Bob Wills in 1940.

◀ Listen at link #19 at fiddle.com/Tune-sound-video-files.page.

"That Brownskin Gal" is a unique piece seemingly native to Texas. Eck Robertson recorded a version with more parts in 1929. Curt Massey did a goofy version in 1934 as a member of the Massey Family. These are the only earlier versions I know of. Wills' variant has two parts. The second one employs third position moves in the key of G similar to ones he used in "Nancy Jane." Steel guitar, piano, and Jesse Ashlock solos are played between Wills' first and second sections.

1
5
9
14
20
26
30
36

From *Favorite American Listening Pieces for Fiddle*, by Stacy Phillips
and *The Phillips Collection of Traditional American Fiddle Tunes Volume 2*, by Stacy Phillips