

This is the sort of thing you're not likely to see outside Texas. Ginny Mac, who is a girlish, giggly 17 years old and barely out of high school, is onstage at a honky-tonk called Big Balls of Cowtown in the Historic Fort Worth Stockyards district. She has long dark hair, and is wearing a blue T-shirt, black vest and black jeans, but she's so small you can barely see her behind the huge keyboard accordion she's pumping away on. She's playing Western swing—basically, a brand of country music and jazz played on string instruments like guitars and fiddles.

Musical trends come and go, and Texans follow 'em all. But Texans also cling ferociously to their own traditions, and swing is one of their finest. Swing is best heard live, and can still be heard live, all across Texas in clubs and dance halls. But it's not enough just to hear Western swing. This is music that makes you want to move your feet, and by that I do not mean line dancing; I mean boot-scootin' waltzes and two-steps. That's what has always distinguished Texas country from its southeastern counterpart: In Texas, country fans have traditionally gone out to huge ballrooms and tiny honky-tonks to dance, rather than simply listen to their favorites. To a large extent, they still do. Most country musicians judge their success by audience applause; in Texas, they judge it by how quickly the floor fills up in front of the bandstand.

But don't worry if you have two left feet. "Even if you're not dancing, you can tap your toes and snap your fingers to it," says the accordion-laden Ginny Mac during a break, explaining the appeal of her grandparents' music to a teenager. "I also love the bounce in it."

Good Western swing, like any good jazz, is improvisational, full of spirited interplay between those on the bandstand, and it's also, to use the musicians' highest word of praise, hot. To watch iconoclasts like Dallas' Tom Morrell and the Time Warp Tophands swap licks is to be constantly surprised and entertained by the music's twists and turns. All this and twang, too.

Swing first heated up in Fort Worth about 70 years ago, and got its second wind in Austin in the 1970s. In those two towns and Dallas, which has always gotten some of Fort Worth's overflow, you can still tap your toes or scoot your boots to some of the swingiest bands in the state. I first fell for Texas music in general, and Western swing in particular, some 35 years ago, and have been able to follow the twists, turns and twangs firsthand since moving to Austin two decades ago. As 27-year-old Fort Worth bandleader Jake Hooker points out, "In Austin their live music scene is well-known, but in Fort Worth you gotta know where to find it." So here's a tour of my favorite dance halls, honky-tonks, hot spots and back-street haunts where you can find this thing called swing.

In the Dallas–Fort Worth area, swing bands like Cowjazz, Morrell's Time Warp Tophands and the Craig Chambers Band keep the faith on the dance floors, as do Alvin Crow, Asleep at the Wheel, and dance hybrids like The Cornell Hurd Band and Redd Volkaert in Austin. More recently, Texas purists have been drawn to the small-combo shuffle sound of Johnny Bush and His Bandoleros, fronted by a surging balladeer who's the undisputed master of the form. Shuffle, which is closely related to swing, was created by Ray Price in the 1950s, and is carried on today by other veterans like Darrell McCall, as well as younger artists like Justin Trevino in Austin and

Hooker in Fort Worth. They're what Texas sounds like when it's being itself, rather than trying to keep up with Top-40 country.

Come any weekend to Fort Worth—a.k.a. Cowtown, a.k.a. Where the West Begins—and there's action on just about any scale you want. For that matter, head out along Interstate Highway 30 to Aledo, just west of town, on Tuesdays, and Gary Carpenter and the Insiders, who specialize in shuffles and other forms of honky-tonk, are likely to be holding forth at the Finish Line, a blue-collar, cry-in-your-beer joint with no cover charge. "Belt-buckle-polishing music," they sometimes call it in these parts. (Hint: Picture couples dancing *thisclose*.) The dance floor, which is not much bigger than the floor of an SUV, will be full of men and women holding on to each other like it's Last Dance; ringing it are single young men in pearl snap-button shirts holding on to their longnecks like it's Last Call. In the Stockyards district, **Billy Bob's Texas** represents the other end of the spectrum: a Texas-sized building—127,000 square feet (nearly 7 acres)—with 32 "bar stations," a souvenir shop selling *Live at Billy Bob's* CDs and live professional bull-riding on Fridays and Saturdays. Everybody who's anybody in country music—Texan or otherwise—has appeared here, which means there's always a chance that a Merle Haggard or a Willie Nelson will be swinging.

Considered Swing Central in the Stockyards for nearly six years, Big Balls of Cowtown is morphing. Owners Gary Beaver and his wife Joyce "Bubbles" Miller recently sold the room to two of their regular customers and plan to concentrate on touring Big Balls road shows around the state, using many of the same acts. They're also gussying up the photo and memorabilia exhibits at **The Cowtown Society of Western Music Museum**, which they run in the Alps Building just down Exchange Avenue from the club. Meanwhile, the two loyal patrons who have become the honky-tonk's new owners have changed the name to **Pearl's Dance Hall and Saloon**, in honor of the fact that the building once housed Pearl's Hotel, a bordello. At press time, a splashy reopening, with a new red-and-gold Old West saloon/bordello look, was scheduled for the weekend of September 5. The good news is that the booking policy isn't changing; the emphasis will still be on swing and other honky-tonk sounds.

The chief competition in the Stockyards may or may not continue to be the 3-year-old **Borrowed Money Saloon**, which has leaned more toward honky-tonk and shuffle bands, though Chambers, Morrell and other Western swingers have played there as well. Owner Sonny Byrd shut the place down in May, and though he vows that he'll soon reopen, at press time he still hadn't done so, except for a few special events. His most recent word was that he'd be permanently back in business in August, with the same booking policies. He's already learned the hard way that those are the sounds the Stockyards wants to hear. "This was going to be a Top-40 country bar, like places I'd run previously in Lubbock and Amarillo," he says, grinning. "But over here they want the older styles; I was amazed at the amount of talent there is in Fort Worth for that kind of music."

“It still sounds fresh,” adds Ray Benson, leader of Austin-based Asleep at the Wheel, whose many major-label albums have kept Western swing before the national audience for the last three decades. “It just doesn’t sound like it came out of 1934.”

Imagine, then, how novel it must have sounded back then. Milton Brown and Bob Wills formed the first two bands of what’s now called Western swing, in 1932 and ’33, respectively. (Wills moved his band, The Playboys, to Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1934 and renamed them the Texas Playboys; look for a slew of 70th-anniversary events next year.) Brown died days after a 1936 car wreck, while Wills kept adding pop and jazz musicians to his string band and expanding his repertoire to include relentlessly swinging arrangements of traditional fiddle tunes, square dances, commercial country, waltzes, boogie-woogie, blackface and minstrel styles, gospel, cowboy songs, polkas, blues, New Orleans jazz, Tin Pan Alley pop, classical, Mexican songs—and more. An unprecedented mix of the down-home and the sophisticated, Wills was scorned by “serious” jazz and country people alike, but as musicians struggled along with everyone else during the Depression, the Texas Playboys routinely filled the biggest dance halls in Texas and Oklahoma and eventually grew into a big band of 18 or more pieces. After World War II, the music spread to California, where many Texans and Oklahomans (including Wills for a while) had moved.

As postwar musical tastes changed, Wills fell out of fashion. But before Wills died in 1975, Merle Haggard revived his name and sound with a much-lauded 1970 tribute album, and surviving Texas Playboys released a reunion album in 1974 and began touring again. (They still do, though their numbers have been further reduced by time.) Since then, Texas swing has had its ups and downs, but has never really gone away, and today Bob Wills is a Texas icon on a par with Sam Houston, Tom Landry and Lyndon Johnson; nearly 30 years after his death, there’s probably not a band in the state that doesn’t play at least one of his classics, such as “Faded Love” or “San Antonio Rose.”

BROKEN SPOKE 3201 South Lamar Boulevard; 512-442-6189; www.brokenspokeaustintx.com

CONTINENTAL CLUB 1315 South Congress Avenue; 512-441-2444; www.continentalclub.com

GINNY’S LITTLE LONGHORN SALOON 5434 Burnet Road; 512-458-1813

JOVITA’S MEXICAN RESTAURANT 1619 South First Street; 512-447-7825

BILLY BOB’S TEXAS 2520 Rodeo Plaza, Fort Worth; 817-624-7117; www.billybobstexas.com

BORROWED MONEY SALOON 2413 Ellis Avenue, Fort Worth; 817-665-0550

THE COWTOWN SOCIETY OF WESTERN MUSIC MUSEUM Alps Building, 222 West Exchange Avenue, Fort Worth; 817-625-7987

FINISH LINE 12035 Highway 80 West, Aledo; 817-244-9966

PEARL’S DANCE HALL AND SALOON 302 West Exchange, Fort Worth; 817-624-2800

SONS OF HERMANN HALL 3414 Elm Street, Dallas; 214-747-4422; www.sonsofhermann.com

SOUTHERN JUNCTION NIGHTCLUB AND STEAKHOUSE 5574 Texas State Highway 276, Rockwall; 972-771-2418; www.southernjunctiononline.com

THE STAGECOACH BALLROOM 2516 East Belknap Street, Fort Worth; 817-831-2261; www.stagecoachballroom.com

TOP RAIL BALLROOM 2110 West Northwest Highway, Dallas; 972-556-9099;

www.toprailballroom.com

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Nowadays, there are still some veterans on the circuit, such as the aforementioned Texas Playboys, featuring singer Leon Rausch and steel guitarist Herb Remington; former Playboys fiddler Johnny Gimble; Tommy Allsup, the only man to play for both Bob Wills and Buddy Holly; and Curtis Potter, onetime bandleader of Hank Thompson & His Brazos Valley Boys, whose 1950s and '60s hits like "Wild Side of Life" blended the swing-tonk fusion you can hear today from George Strait. They play mostly Western swing festivals, though Thompson himself still tours nationally. Jody Nix of Big Spring, Texas, whose father wrote "Big Balls in Cowtown" while fronting his own Western swing band, works the festival and club circuits.

If you're a tourist in Fort Worth and looking for a place to shake a leg where you won't stand out, either Pearl's Dance Hall and Saloon (formerly Big Balls of Cowtown) or the Borrowed Money Saloon—each of which holds a cozy 200 to 300 people and is a magnet for locals and out-of-towners alike—would fit the bill. (But since the former is just reopening and the latter's future has been uncertain, it might be best to call ahead.) At Borrowed Money—assuming the owner has gotten things straightened out and has reopened—you'll find a bunkhouse-shaped wooden building with a front porch and rear beer-garden patio for hot nights. The bar runs nearly the entire length of the front wall, and pickup truck beds are embedded in another so patrons can hold "tailgate parties." The stage itself offers another unique feature: Only some of the musicians fit there; two are instead on risers separated from the stage by an aisle, so listeners can literally stand in the middle of the band. Still, the room is designed for dancing, with the railed-in floor polished slick and shiny. "Texas is for cowboys, and that's what they do to relieve their tensions and stress," says Byrd. "They dance their troubles away and have a good time."

He'll get no argument from Wayne Milligan, bassist and leader of the Coachmen, the house band at **The Stagecoach Ballroom**. The Stagecoach (capacity 1,000) is Cowtown's oldest traditional dance hall, in its current location since 1966. Milligan came there four years ago from Dallas, and immediately noticed a difference. "In Dallas," he says, "they'll look at you and say, 'Entertain me.' Then they'll stare awhile and eventually get on the dance floor. Here, they fill up the floor on the first song and stay there." Milligan keeps it that way with a well-honed mix of swing and honky-tonk standards before turning the stage over to headliners like Johnny Bush.

Across the metroplex in more mainstream Dallas, an occasional such band, amongst the "alternative country" acts, gets booked into the **Sons of Hermann Hall** just off downtown in Deep Ellum—once Dallas' version of Harlem but now a trendy entertainment district. Upstairs at this 1911 fraternal lodge is the oldest wooden dance floor in town, surrounded by windows with lace curtains and blue velvet sashes. And things sometimes get pretty twangy at the **Top Rail**

Ballroom, a Northwest Highway honky-tonk that goes back 70-plus years. But the closest thing around here to the kind of joints we're talking about is **Southern Junction Nightclub and Steakhouse**, a state-of-the-art dance hall in Rockwall, a farming community 30 minutes east of Dallas. Southern Junction boasts a 2,000-square-foot dance floor and holds 700 when tables are set out; it also hickory-grills a pretty good steak (though it's two bucks cheaper if you cook your own). The booking policies are eclectic, encompassing country-flavored Texas singer-songwriters and touring mainstream country stars of the past and present. But there's also a chance you'll catch Asleep at the Wheel, Ray Price or the current version of the Texas Playboys, who've cut two live albums there, and the opening act is bound to be one of the top regional honky-tonk circuit-riders, such as Rob Dixon & the Lost Cowboy Band, fronted by a onetime George Jones guitarist.

In Austin, all dance steps lead to the **Broken Spoke**, a low-slung hall set back from a dirt parking lot amidst the auto repair shops of South Lamar Boulevard. Bush plays there a couple times a year, too, and so does Asleep at the Wheel. But the house favorite is probably swing fiddler Alvin Crow; while the Wheel is primarily a road band, Crow has always been the one Western swing regular around town, thanks to the Spoke. Owners James and Annetta White are confirmed Texas-music chauvinists who'll book just about any kind of danceable country. "He doesn't book anybody he doesn't like personally," Crow points out, "and he doesn't care how well they draw. That's refreshing, and it keeps the traditional Texas format alive."

Gary Carpenter and the Insiders holding forth at the Finish Line.

Not quite 40 years old, the Spoke features a restaurant and a music "museum" with enough of a sense of humor to display one of Bob Wills' half-smoked cigar butts, but the real spectacle is in the rear room. There you can hear cowboy boots clicking and swooshing in time with the band as couples move in majestic, stately circles counterclockwise around the floor. The dancers at the Broken Spoke are so good that locals routinely bring out-of-town visitors there just to see how it's supposed to be done. "I feel sorry for any musician who hasn't been able to stand on the stage at the Broken Spoke and play for those dancers," declares bandleader Cornell Hurd.

Maybe so, but I also feel sorry for anyone who's in Austin on a Thursday night and doesn't see The Cornell Hurd Band at **Jovita's Mexican Restaurant**. With 10 pieces, including a rubboard and baritone sax, Hurd's group approximates the classic Western swing units of yore. He features three lead singers besides himself on an eclectic, infectious set of Texas swing, shuffles (Justin Trevino is his bass player), honky-tonk ballads and what used to be called novelty songs (before they became as novel as something like Hurd's "What Would Ernest Tubb Have Done"). The venue, which books all manner of Texas roots music, is decorated with colorful Mexican murals, and the bandstand and dance floor occupy what was once a patio and still have an outdoorsy feel. Back in the 1970s, Austin emerged as a music center when Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings played the legendary Armadillo World Headquarters, and their sound style and audience converged with those of rock to create the Outlaw country movement. That's what Jovita's feels like on a good night, as purple mohawks and pierced lips two-step beside Resistol hats and creased Wranglers. And it doesn't hurt that the 8 p.m. shows, for which

there's no cover except on weekends, end around 10, when the other clubs around town are just getting going. This is still working men's music, after all.

Austin really does live up to its image as a live-music town, and Lord knows there are enough other clubs offering every kind imaginable, including a wide variety of country, but two more rate special mention. Trevino and his band are regulars at **Ginny's Little Longhorn Saloon**, a beer joint with nine tables, a pool table and a corner of floor where the musicians set up without benefit of a stage. Arguably the town's best-loved roots room, the **Continental Club** swings especially hard when Redd Volkaert, a hulking Canadian and self-described "guitar geek" who played for five years in Merle Haggard's band the Strangers, is in residence. Fortunately, that's often. Volkaert jams out four-hour matinees on his Telecaster every Saturday afternoon for free, then returns on Sunday night with Heybale, a honky-tonk/swing/rockabilly band he shares with Earl Poole Ball, who was Johnny Cash's piano player for two decades. Both men came to Austin around the turn of the decade after concluding that Texas is where they could still play the real deal. These veterans have seen it all and come to the same conclusion as 27-year-old Jake Hooker. "It may not be the most popular music anymore," he says, "but there's still so many people around here who like it. That's why I do it." In Texas music, old ways die hard.

Austin, Texas-based John Morthland is a regular contributor to Texas Monthly, the author of The Best of Country Music (Doubleday Books) and the editor of Mainlines, Blood Feasts and Bad Taste: A Lester Bangs Reader (Anchor Books).

ASLEEP AT THE WHEEL 20 Greatest Hits (Capitol). The best-known work of the best-known modern swing group.

MILTON BROWN & HIS MUSICAL BROWNIES Complete Recordings of the Father of Western Swing, 1932–37 (Texas Rose). Five-CD box documents the birth of small string-band swing (available at originjazz.com).

JOHNY BUSH Green Snakes (Texas Music Group). High drama from the reigning Shuffle King, whose big voice has earned him the nickname "The Country Caruso" (available at antones.com).

JAKE HOOKER & THE OUTSIDERS Live, Set One (Southland). Swinging shuffles from the idiom's brightest young star and his crack band (available at southlandrecords.com).

THE CORNELL HURD BAND Live at Jovita's: Don't Quit Your Night Job (Behemoth). This irresistible large group swings and shuffles with wit and aplomb (available at cornellhurdband.com).

TOM MORELL AND THE TIME WARP TOPHANDS *How the West Was Swung, Vol. 11: Jugglin' Cats* (W.R.). The most traditional, and yet still somehow also the most progressive, of modern swing bands (available at westernswing.net/morrell).

RAY PRICE *The Essential Ray Price*, 1951–1962 (Sony Legacy). You can hear the Texas shuffle being invented over the course of these 20 tracks.

HANK THOMPSON & HIS BRAZOS VALLEY BOYS *Vintage Collections* (Capitol). This is what resulted when Western swing got filtered through honky-tonk country in the postwar years.

VARIOUS ARTISTS *Doughboys, Playboys & Cowboys* (Proper). This budget-priced, four-CD box spotlights every important early Western swing artist, Texan or otherwise (available at propermusic.com).

BOB WILLS AND HIS TEXAS PLAYBOYS *Anthology*, 1935–1973 (Rhino). Two-CD set provides the best introduction to the undisputed King of Western Swing and his various groups.—*J.M.*