

The History of Western Swing Fiddling

By Stacy Phillips

Western swing music often falls into the cracks when the pantheon of American musics is tallied. It is ignored by mainstream jazz and often mistakenly lumped with country or even folk music. (Most of the hot "hillbilly" string bands have had elements of all three.) Western swing also happens to be a gold mine for lovers of jazz violin. It features a great many more violin solos than in any other form of jazz. The relative accessibility of most of the improvisers makes it an excellent choice for players who are just learning to create their own variations. A basic knowledge of this genre, along with at least the rudiments of old time fiddle tunes, bluegrass, blues, commercial country and Cajun, form the prerequisite knowledge of modern professional fiddlers. This article serves as an introduction to some of the fiddling innovators of western swing and their contributions.

The style evolved out of the way Texas string bands played the pop music of the 1930s.¹ Let us begin with the situation in the 1920s before any "hot string bands" (as they were known before "western swing" was coined) were formed.²

Eastern Texas had a thriving (what would now be called) old time fiddle tradition for generations by the time the recording industry began to "freeze" their performances on disc. The fame of Alexander "Eck" Robertson's fabulous, multi-part rendition of "Sally Gooden" (recorded in the early '20s) and his stylistic descendants on the current contest scene have bequeathed a distorted picture of the typical sound of Texas fiddling at that time. Though under-recorded, by far the bulk of fiddling was indistinguishable from many of the concurrent Southeastern styles. None of Robertson's other recordings resemble his highly varied approach to "Sally Gooden." The treatment of this tune seems to have been unique in the local repertoire. The rest of his output is analogous to the efforts of eastern peers like Clark Kessinger, Charlie Strippling and Wil Gilmer. Rags were performed perhaps a bit more slickly in Texas, but improvisations and variations were not practiced to a significant degree.

At one time it was hypothesized that the raggy but elegant East Texas Serenaders, featuring D.H. Williams on violin, were a direct precursor to hot string bands. This has been discounted by people who saw them, including Johnny Gimble. As a young man, the latter learned the *hokum* (also known as the *double shuffle*) bow pattern by watching Williams, but never heard any take-off solos from this group and never connected them with the sort of music at which he later excelled.

There *were* a few string bands that played some pop music but without improvisations. The most significant of them turned out to be The Wills Fiddle Band, which eventually included not only Bob Wills but vocalist Milton Brown when it became the Light Crust Doughboys. It was the latter who went on his own in 1932 to form the seminal swing string band, Milton Brown and His Musical Brownies. It was Brown's singing prowess that changed the focus of Texas fiddle bands from instrumentals to vocals.

The Brownies' original recording lineup featured the first take-off fiddler in this new amalgam of musical styles, Cecil Brower. Brower had the technique of a classical musician, having played in the Dallas Symphony, as well as in the "legit" dance band of Ted Fio Rito (popularizer of "Cielito Lindo"). He also had listened carefully to the work of Joe Venuti, the first and probably most influential swing fiddler of all time.³

Brower's training set high technical standards for all who followed — meticulous in rhythmic phrasing and in-tune all over the fingerboard. Jimmy Thomason, a future swing musician, was a young man when Brower first hit the stage.

"When I started trying to play... the only (fiddle players) around were the old timers that played hoedowns... Then when Cecil Brower came to the Brownies, that was it. That was the absolute end. He was the greatest I ever heard in my life! That was entirely different from the

¹There were a few southeastern swing string bands from the same era that were not as commercially or artistically successful. Many were greatly influenced by their southwestern counterparts. I believe that some of the fiddlers and rhythm sections in these groups were never able to completely submerge their old time roots, to the detriment of their approach to jazz and improvisation. Among the more successful bands were Clayton McMichen's Georgia Wildcats and Norman Phelps' Virginia Rounders.

²A music promotor named Foreman Phillips apparently coined the term in the mid-1940s, and first applied it to Spade Cooley's band. Cooley eventually surpassed Bob Wills in popularity, but featured only infrequent, short spasms of hot fiddling.

³The general swing approach to bowing as well as specifics like the double shuffle can be traced to Venuti.

Wills type fiddle... The difference between Brower and Wills...was in the execution. Cecil's was perfect. Because he was classically trained, you know." [Quoted in Ginell. See recommended sources.]

While not a great jazz soloist early in his career (his melodic and rhythmic improvisations were fairly conservative), he knew how to swing hard using *off* (or *rag*) bowing and swing 1/8 notes.

Example 1 is a brief excerpt from his 1936 solo on "Draggin' the Bow" (recorded with Bill Boyd's group), a western swing standard. *Off* bowing connects an up-beat note with the following down beat. Brower often accented the second note (down beat) of each slur. Use swing phrasing on all the music examples in this article.

Example 1

On his Brownies recordings, Brower committed many hokum bowing solos. He grew as an improviser and recorded with many bands over a thirty year career including the Bob Wills and Bill Boyd groups.

When Brower left the Brownies for Fio Rito, he was replaced by a nineteen year old who became western swing's first great stylist,

Cliff Bruner. His original approach has served as a model for other greats like J.R. Chatwell and Johnny Gimble. Bruner's work on the 1937 recording of "New Falling Rain Blues" (example 2 below) illustrates a couple of motives that have become standard. Of particular note is his creative use of pauses as an integral part of his constructions, and the use of *broken scale* licks (my own nomenclature), especially noticeable in measures 8–10. Bruner played this at about MM=136.

As became typical with many western swing fiddlers, most of Bruner's recorded take-offs were quite short, so you are likely to experience frustration as Bruner ends many of his solos just as he appears to be revving up.

After a short absence, Cecil Brower decided that he could make more money back with Milton Brown. He teamed up with Bruner to form the first, and perhaps greatest, western swing double fiddle pair.⁴ (The idea to team them may have been made obvious by a similar line up in some types of Mexican string music, a sound readily accessible to Texans.)

Bruner acknowledges learning a great deal from his couple of years with Brower. When the Brownies broke up, following the untimely death of Milton Brown, Bruner formed his own band, the Texas Wanderers, that became immensely successful, be it only in Texas, for many years. As he once told me, "I turned down a Hollywood job, pictures and all that, because we were making a tremendous amount of money, more than the President of the United States."

Example 2: "New Falling Rain Blues" as played by Cliff Bruner, from *Western Swing Fiddle*, by Stacy Phillips (Oak Publications)

⁴The slightly earlier *Southern Melody Boys* with a Brower/Kenneth Pitts violin tandem was a transitional group that bordered on a jazz sensibility.

The next great voice in western swing violin was *J.R. Chatwell* who was inspired by Bruner and Stuff Smith.⁵ Bruner remembered seeing J.R. hanging around the stage at several of his appearances. He later hired Chatwell as a pianist in his band. In Chatwell's hands the use of pauses was occasionally taken to wacky extremes, as in Example 3 below, an excerpt from "Sometimes." This particular solo was a particular influence on Johnny Gimble.

His melodic inventiveness and daring was a step up from his predecessors. Most of his recorded output was with Adolph Hofner's group, an ensemble with an often mundane repertoire. Chatwell's efforts frequently soar over the rest of the music.

A careful listen to both players reveals that *Johnny Gimble* was greatly inspired by Chatwell's style. Gimble stands as a landmark in the development of western swing. His control of a wide palette of melodic possibilities — broken scale riffs, use of neighboring tones, insertion of diminished and augmented runs to connect chords, and the way he can make perfect sense of *outside* notes is evidence of consummate skill. (See the transcription of his "Quick Step Annie" solo on page 9 for examples of some of this.) When Gimble is improvising full tilt, the impact of Bruner and Chatwell's rhythmic sense is also evident. All western swing and commercial country fiddlers have copied his licks.

See the article on Gimble in this issue for more information on this great. His solos on "Corrine, Corrina" (on Merle Haggard's Bob Wills tribute album), "Beaumont Rag," and his country hit "Fiddlin' Around" are three personal favorites among Gimble's many great efforts.

Though I consider Bruner, Chatwell and Gimble to be the big three of western swing fiddle, there are many other excellent and distinctive stylists. Perhaps foremost among the rest is *Hugh Farr*, mainstay instrumentalist of the Sons of the Pioneers. Most of their output was not at all jazzy, but on their up tempo numbers and on the many duets with guitarist/brother Karl Farr, Hugh was a sweet swinger. He seldom moved from first position but delivered consistently elegant solos with the help of one of the best bow arms in the world of violin. His connection with the Pioneers lasted over thirty years.

Example 3

⁵Smith was the hardest swinging player in mainstream swing. He began recording in the mid-'30s.

⁶Which fiddlers call "playing over the bass."

Curt Massey played in a very popular family band, Louise Massey and the Westerners, beginning in the late '30s. His hot playing is under-recorded, but the group's frequent nationally broadcast radio shows made him an admired member of the swing fraternity.

Bobby Bruce is another important, though relatively unknown western swing fiddler. Most of his touring career was with Leon McAuliffe and the Cimarron Boys and the Jimmy Wakely Band. Like Massey and Brower, he has concert violinist chops. Other fiddlers have remarked on his mastery of double stops in a swing context. In the 1970s and '80s, he was often hired to play swing on movie and television sound tracks, so you have probably heard him without realizing it.

Before dealing with Bob Wills' contribution to western swing fiddling, I should mention three other performers whose work I greatly admire, though they are relatively uncelebrated and made few recordings. *Buddy Ray* and *Dickie Jones* played with many short-lived Texas bands in the '30s and '40s, sometimes forming an excellent double fiddle combination. *Don Decker* is an obscure performer who played some incredibly intense solos on electric viola with the T. Texas Tyler band in the late 1940s. I would appreciate any information on the musical biography of these fine players.

I have saved the Bob Wills band for last. He featured some great swing violinists, most notably *Keith Coleman* (who formed a sensational duo with Bobby Bruce in Leon McAuliffe's band), *Joe Holley* (who played a standard right-handed violin left handed⁶) and Johnny Gimble, as well as fine improvisers like *Jesse Ashlock* (the take-off fiddler on Wills' earliest recordings) and *Louis Tierney* (a smooth non-bluesy performer who doubled on saxophone). His recorded output is by far the largest of any western swing band, and is the most generally available in reissue.

Bob Wills was not a swing musician. He came from a family of old time fiddlers whose repertoire included a bunch of tunes apparently peculiar to them. "Maiden's Prayer," "Faded Love," and tunes whose original titles have been lost and that were the basis for "Stay All Night," "Bob Wills Special" and "Take Me Back to



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Tulsa” are just some examples of these. They form part of the western swing repertoire that differentiates it from “mainstream” urban swing of the 1930s. While jazz solos are taken on these tunes, their melody and phrasing are pure old time fiddle.

Wills’ personal style was definitely tradition-based, but stylistically unique. There is never a doubt who is playing when he solos.⁷ Because of his commercial success, he has not been given the attention he deserves in old time circles, while he is perhaps over-lionized by many western swing fans. Wills’ style is commemorated by serving as the basis for fiddling on *Ray Price-shuffles*; the back-to-basics sound of fiddle in commercial country music.⁸

Wills’ bands epitomize the similarities and differences (besides the instrumentation) between western and “urban” swing. Both types of bands play the hit tunes of the 1920s - ’40s (now usually referred to as *standards*), featuring improvised solos and typical swing rhythm styles. The mainstream bands tend to use more

ensemble arrangements, and frequently, both more complex and highly embellished chords and progressions. The western swing repertoire is more diverse. Fiddlers in this setting need to know how to play polkas, schottisches and hoedowns, and have to be familiar with commercial country styles. They also must improvise over quite basic (sometimes almost static) chordal background, a very different challenge than the typical “playing (or “running”) the changes” of many mainstream swing solos.⁹ The most popular part of Wills’ repertoire, tunes like “Stay All Night,” “Take Me Back to Tulsa,” and most fiddle tunes have little in the way of harmonic content.

The relative (to swing versions of standards) lack of chordal movement of the Dixieland (or trad-jazz) repertoire makes this a comfortable fit for competent western swingers. Bob Wills’ bands usually employed a Dixieland style back-up rhythm. So it is not surprising that Johnny Gimble often appears with clarinetist Pete Fountain’s groups without missing a beat. ♪

⁷Unless he is being imitated, which still happens frequently.

⁸The style was defined by Tommy Jackson’s solos on Ray Price’s country hits of the early ’60s. Prime examples include “Crazy Arms” and “My Shoes Keep Walking Back to You.”

⁹This sort of improvisatory approach is typical on standards, i.e. music by such composers as Cole Porter, George Gershwin and Jerome Kern that commonly have two chords per measure for a large portion of a tune.