

Texas Old-time fiddle and Western Swing have been the musical loves of my life. In my exploration of these genres, I also delved into Dixieland and Big Band Swing. Going back to the roots of the music has always been my passion. Therefore, I seek out the pioneers of each genre. I listen to them constantly, saturating myself in the genre. I strive to learn not just “what” they played, but more importantly, “how” they played it. A magical piece of how they played is represented in how crafted and rhythmically placed each solo is. It is not just about the notes, its more importantly about stylistically speaking the language and playing with the correct rhythmic feel and groove.

Below is the culmination of 20 years of searching for the most notable Western Swing fiddlers and discovering the who’s who in this grand genre. Receiving this list would have been a childhood dream of mine, so I do believe that I worked a bit harder just because I had to search and discover. As you explore this music and share it, I hope you can capture the love and joy of the music to help connect modern players with the great pioneer musicians whose shoulders we stand on.

WESTERN SWING FIDDLE PLAYERS

Bob Wills (1905 – 1975) himself was as an old-fashioned “breakdown” fiddler. When there was an old- time fiddle tune it would usually be led by Bob Wills on the fiddle. Born in Turkey, Texas in 1905, Bob Wills was brought up in a family of no less than 17 fiddle players. He started off as a "breakdown" fiddler, playing the standard "old timey" Texas repertoire of reels and polkas, but was strongly influenced by the blues of the neighboring African American fieldworkers, by the local Mexican fiddlers, and by the jazz which was widely heard on the radio broadcasts. His first band was a duo with guitarist Herman Arnspriger; they were soon joined by brothers Milton and Durwood Brown (on vocals and guitar). At that time, to achieve any success a band needed both a radio station and a

commercial sponsor; they were taken on by radio KFJZ in Fort Worth, and were given the name "The Light Crust Doughboys" by their sponsor, the Light Crust Flour Company. In 1933 Bob formed Bob Wills & Texas Playboys and the rest is history. **Discography: The Tiffany Transcriptions (10 albums), For the Last Time.**

Cecil Brower (1914-1965) was a classically trained violinist. He never played country fiddle, but fully mastered the jazz idiom. He joined the Milton Brown and the Musical Brownies in 1933, forming the first harmonizing twin fiddle partnership in western swing, with either Jesse Ashlock or, Cliff Bruner playing the other fiddle part. He also played for a bit in the Light Crust Doughboys.

Discography: Doughboys, Playboys and Cowboys: The Golden Years of Western Swing box set

Cliff Bruner (1915 – 2000) was one of the few notable Texas swing fiddle players who did not play with Bob Wills. He quit cotton picking at the age of 14, and his first musical employment was with medicine shows. He joined Milton Brown in 1934, recording 48 sides with him; at the time this was the biggest western swing band around. Following Brown's death Bruner formed his own band The Texas Wanderers, moving from Fort Worth to Beaumont, Texas. In this band he played twin fiddles with J R Chatwell, (described by Johnny Gimble as a "gutbucket violinist"). He also worked with the Texas Governor Pappy O'Daniel's band, the Hillbilly Boys, and the Louisiana Governor Jimmie Davis. Fiddler Joe Holly (above) said of Cliff Bruner "Hey, I'll tell you what, I used to stand with my mouth open listening to that guy play! Lord, he was the greatest!"

Jesse Ashlock (1915-1976) was the first and longest standing of Will's fiddle players, and the first to do "take off" solos. He had a considerable armory of techniques including the double shuffle, triplets, parallel fifths and lots of syncopation. Ashlock said of his playing "I try to do the same thing on fiddle that jazzmen do on a trumpet." He initially learned fiddle as a teenager, sitting in behind Bob Wills. His idol, apart from Wills himself, was pioneering jazz fiddler Joe Venuti, from whom he learned much of his technique. He would play some Venuti solos note for note. He was hired by Milton Brown in 1932 when he left to form the Musical Brownies, but joined the Texas Playboys after Brown's death.

Discography: Stompin' Singers and Western Swingers, Bowboy Ramblers: Bill Boyd and Jim Boyd

Joe Holley (1917-2009) was a hot and often energetic jazz fiddler, he was largely influenced by jazz violinist, Stuff Smith, and did his first recordings with the Texas playboys in 1942. Being left-handed, he always added an elegant symmetry to band photos when sharing a microphone with Wills. His solos would be introduced with "Aaaah Jooooey!" You can hear him doing a great solo on "Twinkle Twinkle", including some blinding double-stop trills. He was one of the musicians who left the band with Tommy Duncan in 1948, though he returned on occasion in the 50's.

Louis Tierney was a great swing jazz player, he played fiddle on most of the Tiffany Transcriptions sessions. You can hear him playing twin fiddles with Joe Holley and Bob Wills on those records.; He does notable jazz lines where he jumps of high in a very Venutiesque style. rns; he was with the Texas Playboys from 1940-1947. **Discography: The Tiffany Transcriptions**

Billie “Tiny” Moore (1920 – 1987) Moore was born in the town of Port Arthur, Texas in 1920. His primary instrument was electric mandolin. While a member of the Texas Playboys from 1946 – 1950 he played electric mandolin and fiddle. From the liner notes of the Tiffany Transcriptions: He, Eldon Shamblin and Herb Remington created a new, more dynamic amplified string ensemble. IN 1982, he explained it this way. “The texture of the band changed from solo work and fiddles to harmony guitar parts and... triple fiddle harmonies...The three of us knew the chord progressions. And if I thought of an idea or lick, they’d just put harmonies to it. Eldon, the catalyst, remembered how they got it done. “We used to sit down and just work the parts out. Tiny was a good harmony man. We didn’t play ‘em off the cuff. We figured them out. Herbie was in the middle, Tiny was on top and I was on bottom.

Harry Simms – Andy Parker and the Plainsmen was one of the best and most highly acclaimed country western cowboy groups that emerged during the 1940s. Alongside the popular Sons of the Pioneers, they were heavily influenced by the pop music of the day. Originally trained classically, Harry provided tasteful, high level solos to the Plainsmen band.

Johnny Gimble (1926-2015) is considered by many to be the finest and most influential Western Swing fiddler of modern times. Born in 1926 in east Texas, he learned mostly by listening to the radio, for example to the Light Crust Doughboys’ show. He was particularly influenced by Cliff Bruner’s version of *Draggin the Bow*. He joined Jimmie Davis’ campaign band in Louisiana, and during the war found himself in Vienna, where he developed an abiding love for the waltz. From 1949 he played for Bob Wills for two years, then in the early 50’s he began doing studio session work, mostly for Columbia producer Don Law; he

also did regular TV work, hosting his own show in Dallas for three years. Though a western swing player at heart, most of his work was in commercial country music; in Nashville in the 60's and 70's he was the first-call player, recording with, among others, Willie Nelson, Merle Haggard, Charlie Pride, Dolly Parton, Loretta Lynn, Tammy Wynette, Chet Atkins, George Strait and Asleep at the Wheel. His playing is distinctive in its extreme smoothness and accuracy. He specialized in complex double-stop patterns, as exemplified in his compositions such as the *Gardenia Waltz* and *Fiddlin' Around*, both of which have become challenging contest standards. From the 70's onwards he emerged from the anonymity of session work and was recognized as a performer and artist in his own right, picking up numerous awards and Grammy nominations.

Discography: Just for Fun, Texas Fiddle Collection, For the Last Time, Fiddlin' Around

Kieth Coleman is probably best known for his many years as a Western Swing fiddler with Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys. Coleman also played with other great artists as well, including Country Music Hall of Fame members Hank Thompson and Ray Price. Among other musicians, Coleman was also known for his ability to read music and play a variety of other instruments including the saxophone. But it was his greatness as a fiddler for which he is best known and most respected. Legendary fiddle player and National Fiddler Hall of Fame inductee, Johnny Gimble, once said that Keith Coleman was the "Fiddler's Fiddler." As with many great western swing artists, Keith Coleman also had one foot in the world of jazz. The result was a unique style that helped give Bob Wills that distinctive sound that made the Texas Playboys one of the most popular bands of all time. **Discography: For the Last Time, Puritan Sessions (Jethro Burns)**

Karl Farr (December 6, 1903 - April 17, 1980). Brothers Hugh and Karl Farr were the most important fiddle-and-guitar duo in the history of country & western music, a team of brother virtuosos who brought the vocabulary and dexterity of the best jazz into the confines of country and cowboy songs for more than 25 years. That they aren't better known as a duo stems from the fact that their work from the mid-'30s onward was largely confined to membership in the Sons of the Pioneers. (Artist Biography by Bruce Eder) **Discography: Texas Stomp**

There are many more fiddlers not to be forgotten Adolf Hofner, Merle Haggard, Dale Potter, Buddy Spicher, Terry Morris, Hank Singer, Bobby Hicks., and so many more.....Enjoy your Western Swing exploration!

Katie Glassman