

TEXAS DANCE HALL PRESERVATION, INC.

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Lifetime Achievement Award**

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<https://www.texasdancehall.org>



A look back over TDHP's first ten years and ahead to the future



Deb Fleming
TDHP Executive Director



Steph McDougal
TDHP President and Co-Founder

As 2017 draws to a close, I've been thinking back on Texas Dance Hall Preservation's first decade and looking forward to our next ten years. TDHP is evolving from an all-volunteer group into a "grown-up" nonprofit organization, with staff and regular programming, one that is starting to make a significant positive impact for dance halls here in the Lone Star state. We are working to help dance halls stay open, become financially sustainable, and maintain those iconic buildings.

In the past several years, we've made great strides. Many dance halls are owned by all-volunteer nonprofit organizations, and the halls typically have unmet maintenance or building systems needs. In 2016, TDHP started a Preservation Fund and has made small grants to four nonprofit halls. We've helped dance hall owners earn revenue and find other funding for hall repairs, and we've consulted with them on how to make appropriate changes that don't damage the important historic elements that make dance hall architecture unique.

Deb Fleming has been the "energizer bunny" of Texas Dance Hall Preservation for years, and she has spent hours criss-crossing Texas to visit dance halls, help Texas dance halls get media exposure, and network with each other. To be honest, she does pretty much everything for this organization, and when she stepped down at the end of her term as president earlier this year, we immediately hired her to be our first-ever (part-time) executive director. We've also built a stronger, larger board of directors and advisory board, with members who bring a wealth of experience and expertise to bear for dance hall owners.

We're developing new partnerships, too, including with our generous corporate sponsor, Lone Star Beer, and with YETI Coolers, whose Texas Dance Hall Trail campaign is featured later in this issue. And TDHP is now working with SPJST, the Czech organization that was founded in 1897 in Fayetteville and now is the largest fraternal organization in Texas, to help catalog their lodges' building needs and help those groups find funding for repairs. We hope to partner with other fraternal groups, as well. One of our long-term goals is to help as many halls as possible take advantage of the Texas State Historic Tax Credit program.

I'd be remiss if I didn't tell you how thrilled we are to be working closely with Ray Benson and his Western swing band, Asleep at the Wheel, who brought us along on their spring and fall Texas Dance Hall Tours in 2017. More importantly, the Wheel brought hundreds of new people to dance halls that they might otherwise never have visited, exposing folks from all over the U.S. (and some Canadians!) to the treasures we often take for granted here in Texas.

It's been an exciting couple of years, that's for sure! But there is still much work to do. In 2018, we'll formalize the application process for Preservation Fund grants and increase the total amount of money available. We'll launch an improved dance hall database and events calendar on our website, and roll out some new programs. And we'll complete a toolkit, currently in progress, to help owners of vacant and infrequently used dance halls weatherize, stabilize, and secure their buildings. TDHP will also create more resources for dance hall owners to help them on the business side, and we have a few more surprises up our sleeves!

Thank you for being part of this exciting adventure and for your enthusiasm for Texas dance halls! If you have ideas to share with TDHP, or if you'd like to become a volunteer, please don't hesitate to let us know at info@texasdancehall.org.

Steph McDougal

OLD HALLS, NEW OWNERS

Two historic Texas dance halls get a new lease on life

Swiss Alp Dance Hall Schulenberg, Texas

You may not immediately think of eBay as the place to list a dance hall for sale, but that's exactly what happened earlier this year. Historic Swiss Alp Dance Hall, along with two acres of land and a café, was listed in an online auction that drew nearly 100 bidders, after previous owners Kevin and Donna Ustynik decided to retire. The hall had been for sale through conventional channels for several years.

New owners Bill and DeLisa Pettit have made many renovations to the hall, including adding a larger parking lot and air conditioning that can be used or not, preserving the hall's historic "open air" character while allowing for a greater degree of comfort during the hot summer months.

Centrally located along Highway 77 between Austin, Houston, and San Antonio, Swiss Alp Dance Hall regularly features live music and is also available to rent for special events. Acknowledging the community's love for the hall, the Pettits "hope to make memories for generations to come." For more information, visit www.swissalptexas.com.

**For Sale
Dance Hall**

Longhorn Ballroom Dallas, Texas

To say Dallas' landmark Longhorn Ballroom has a colorful history is like saying LeBron James is tall—yes, it's self-evident, but you gotta start somewhere.

In the course of its 67-year history, it's hosted everyone from Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys to the Sex Pistols. Originally dubbed the Bob Wills Ranch House, it was built as a sort of home base for Western Swing king by an eccentric tycoon named O.L. Nelms, who famously distributed bumperstickers and put up billboards that read, "Thanks for helping O.L. Nelms make another million." At one point, the place was managed by Jack Ruby, the Big D nightclub owner who shot JFK assassin Lee Harvey Oswald on national TV.

The set-up, with its wagon-wheel adorned stage and Western Town façade and murals, complete with a statue of a giant Longhorn guarding the marquee, was a monument to Western kitsch.

In its heyday, under the management of a legendary promoter named Dewey Groom, the Longhorn presented the crème-de-la-crème of country music's biggest stars, including George Jones, Tammy Wynette, Merle Haggard, Buck Owens and Willie Nelson. But it also hosted the Red-Hot Chili Peppers, B.B. King, the Ramones, Otis Redding and, of course, the aforementioned Sex Pistols.

Alas, like so much that is iconic and colorful in Dallas, the Longhorn seemed destined to face the wrecking ball and the bulldozer. By the early 2000s, it had fallen into disuse and decline. But then, in February of this year, a Dallas entrepreneur named Jay LaFrance acquired the property from owner Raul Ramirez, who had been using the vacant hall to host dances and birthday parties.

LaFrance originally considered razing the ballroom and re-developing the land, but the more he learned about the venue and its history, the more he became determined to help the Longhorn enter a new era. "I have a passion for music and a passion for history," he told *Texas Monthly*, "and it'd be a shame for this place to be bulldozed over and replaced by apartments that could be put anywhere else."

LaFrance, who is working on the project with one of his sons and his daughter, wants to restore the Western façade and murals and create a multi-use creative hub that could accommodate artists and musicians, an outdoor public space and, eventually, restore the 20,000-square foot ballroom to its live music heyday. Already, the venue is set to hold the multi-faceted "Edge of Texas" summit created by Texas Monthly and Meat Fight, a fundraising barbecue competition.

With any luck, the Longhorn Ballroom still has a lot of history to make.

FEATURED

An Interview with Gary P. Nunn

JOHN T. DAVIS



If he'd never made an ill-conceived trip to England with Michael Martin Murphey many years ago, the acclaimed PBS television series *Austin City Limits* would not have had its iconic theme song. Jerry Jeff Walker's landmark 1973 album, *Viva Terlingua!* would have been missing one of its signature singalongs, and generations of beer-drinking Texans could never have chimed in (frequently off-key, but still) on millions of choruses of "I wanna go home with the armadillo..."

In other words, if Gary P. Nunn had never done anything but pen "London Homesick Blues," his place in Texas music would be secure. But from his days of playing in West Texas rock 'n' roll bands to his seminal tenures with Murphey and Walker and his own Lost Gonzo Band, to his current status as one of the premier statesmen of Lone Star country singer-songwriters, Gary P. Nunn has carved out a King Ranch-style niche in Texas country music. Nunn took a few minutes to talk with us about his career and some of his favorite dance halls.

What role have dance halls played in your career?

They've played a very significant role in my career, because that's where I've made most of my money. I've tailored my show to be able to provide good dance music, rather than putting together a "show" type of thing.

Were dance halls a part of your life growing up in West Texas?

In the town where I grew up, the First Presbyterian Church would open on Friday night and all the kids would dance—the Hully Gully and the Frog and the Twist, whatever was going on. It wasn't until I got into the Broken Spoke (in Austin) in the early Eighties that I started really playing the Western dance hall and two-stepping types of music.

Is it important to preserve the dance hall culture that still exists in Texas?

Absolutely! One of the things that I enjoy the most is playing these classic old dance halls like Luckenbach or Schroeder Hall—it's carrying on the tradition that's such a big part of early Texas history and culture.

Do you have a favorite?

I love to play Luckenbach and Gruene Hall; those are my favorites. They are classic old venues that are full of history.

You participated in one of the most famous albums ever recorded at a dance hall—Jerry Jeff Walker's *Viva Terlingua!*, recorded at Luckenbach Dance Hall. Was that your first time to play a dance hall?

Thinking about it, it might have been, actually. Prior to those days, we

(Jerry Jeff and the Lost Gonzo Band) were just primarily doing concerts. But it became apparent that it such a part of Texas culture, and I wanted to be a part of it. It was an incredible, magical thing that happened there. The whole atmosphere there in Luckenbach contributed so much to (te success of the recording).

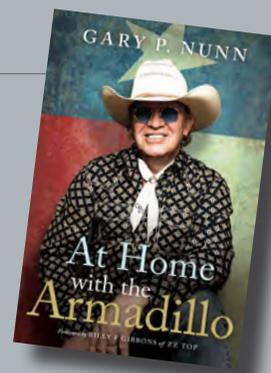
Explain for a non-Texan the difference between dance halls, honky-tonks and beer joints.

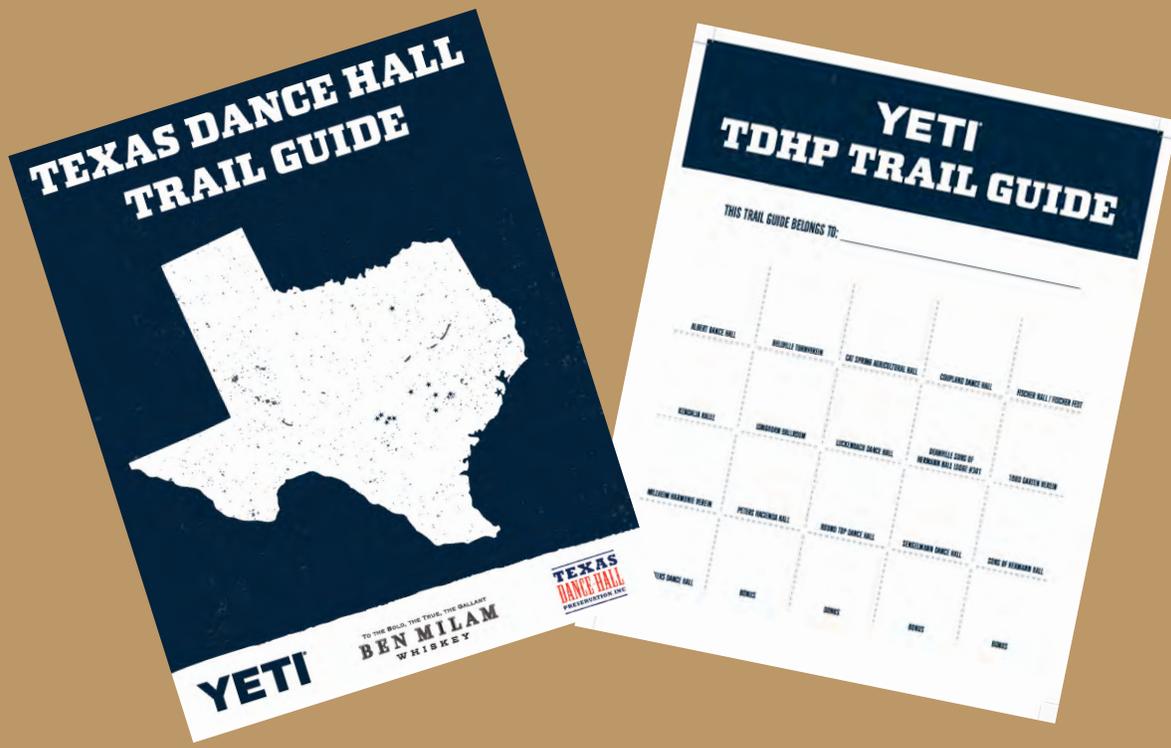
The old dance halls were built by primarily German, Czech and Polish people. And dancing, drinking beer, and having family get-togethers were very much a part of their lives. These halls were, and are, very significant to community socializing like weddings, funerals, festivals and all that. The thing I like about it is that they were used for family-oriented things, whereas a beer joint might not be a good place to take a child.

Is there one of your shows at a dancehall that stands out?

This past Valentine's Day, at the Hug-In at Luckenbach, we had about 700–800 people out there. It's great; you perform so much better. The audience is there to see you, and dancing is such a big part of it. It's so great when you got a packed house and the dance floor is full of young people.

Gary P. Nunn's first book, *At Home with the Armadillo*, is on sale now. Visit <http://www.garypnunn.com/> for more information and to place your order.





TDHP and YETI Coolers—the company that is to coolers as Topo Chico is to fizzy water—have entered into an exciting partnership that will give Texas dance hall fans another reason to travel the state and visit some of Texas’ most storied and historic dance halls.

When you visit dance halls on the designated YETI Texas Dance Hall Trail, you can collect stamps, stick those on your downloadable Trail Guide, and qualify for free YETI swag. (The Cult of YETI is so strong that even the Yankees up at the *New York Times* were compelled to take note.)

The contest runs from October 6–February 18, 2018, with limited numbers of free items available at the YETI flagship store in Austin. Rules for the contest can be found here: <https://texasdancehalltrail.splashthat.com/>.

Halls featured on the Trail route cover an array of Central Texas and Hill Country dance halls, including Twin Sisters Dance Hall, Dallas’ Longhorn Ballroom, Bellville Turnverein, Luckenbach Dance Hall, and more—16 historic halls, all told.

If you need an excuse—and who needs an excuse?—to hit the road, order a cold beer, and two-step to live music in the presence of a piece of Lone Star history, here’s your chance.

TEXAS DANCE HALLS NEED YOU!

Want to learn more about TDHP and make a positive difference for dance halls? Visit texasdancehall.org to get the latest news and info. We hope you’ll consider becoming a member of Texas Dance Hall Preservation and a \$25 individual membership makes a great gift! Your membership helps us provide assistance directly to dance hall owners and their communities. Thank you for reading and sharing this newsletter with friends!



Adolph Hofner and the COTTON-EYED JOE

BY GARY MCKEE

July 30, 2017, was designated *Adolph Hofner Day* in Moulton, Texas (pop. 944). A state historic marker was dedicated by the Lavaca County Historical Commission to honor the origins of Hofner, one of the most prolific live musicians in Texas. It was the first historic marker in Texas to honor a polka musician. Adolph Hofner was born in 1916 into a German/Czech household and grew up in the 1920s speaking primarily Czech. The music of his early life was provided by polka and brass bands, surrounded by laughter and gaiety. After his parents moved to San Antonio when he was sixteen, he began hearing the string band music that was the precursor to country music. Adolph and his brother Emil (or “Bash,” as he was known) became infatuated with string music and started a band together in their teens. They later went their separate ways, and after a decade of finding their sound in various bands, the Hofner brothers reunited and started their own group. Their popularity grew and a hit single, “Maria Elena”, made them widely noticed. The band—under various names—took to the road and began playing full-time for the next four-plus decades. One of Adolph Hofner’s hits has become fairly immortal wherever there are cowboy boots and dance floors: The Cotton-Eyed Joe.

The origins of the Cotton-Eyed Joe, as with songs that are credited as “traditional music” as the songwriter, are numerous. There are stories that it originated as an Irish reel (a fiddle-heavy folk song) in the early 1800s, or maybe it was a slave song sung in different states with various lyrics. Both are possible, and it is also entirely possible that multiple versions were blended together over the decades. In 1882, Louise Pynelle published sheet music with lyrics from a version that she heard sung on her Alabama plantation. Regardless of exactly where the song was born, it spread quickly throughout the South, becoming a square-dance favorite. An 1875 issue of *The Saturday Evening Post* contains a story referencing the song, and in 1884, *The Firemen’s Magazine* dubbed the tune “an old, familiar air.”

The first known recordings (on 78 rpm records) were cut by two different bands in 1929. Square dance versions by string bands the Dykes Magic City Trio and Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers documented the fiddle-driven square dance tune. Although distribution was very limited and airplay minimal in the 1930s, the catchy tune was spread by word of mouth. Apparently, a few Texas Hill Country square dancers were aware of it.

In the 1940s, Adolph Hofner and his San Antonians were playing their regular weekly gigs in the Hill Country. Adolph now picks up the story: “My band and I were playing in Sabina at the American Legion Hall, and all the people at the dance wanted us to play Cotton-Eyed Joe. J.R. Chatwell (aka “Chat the Cat”) was playing fiddle with us then. There was an old-timey fiddle player at the dance, and during intermission, he sat there and taught J.R. how to play Cotton-Eyed Joe. That very night in the year 1940, we started playing that tune. It was very simple to play. Then we started playing it at our weekly dances in Bandera at Mansfield Park.

“The first part of 1941, my band and I had a recording session at the Alolphus Hotel in Dallas, Texas, for Columbia Records. We needed an extra song to complete the session of eight sides to make four records. And guess what? We used Cotton-Eyed Joe as the needed song.” The song was an instrumental with the exception of a few refrains of “Ahhh, the Cotton-Eyed Joe.”

“Cotton-Eyed Joe became the rage in the [Texas dude-ranch capital] town of Bandera. During World War II, there were so many tourists and people from the military bases that would go to Bandera to take in the cowboy/western atmosphere and come to our dances at Mansfield Park. The dance

spread, and so did our record. The people learned the dance and bought our record, taking it back home with them; be it New York, Louisiana, wherever they came from. [Fans would take the record to the local station to be shared over the air.] It became a national dance music [hit] which started in Bandera. To my knowledge, we had the authenticated music for the way they danced the Cotton-Eyed Joe in Bandera, where dancers formed a line and kicked up their heels. I remember Wilton Crider and his wife from Medina, Texas, would come to our dances and say, ‘They don’t do it the right way.’ He and his wife danced in pairs and were experts at it.”

Mr. Crider loved dancing it his way, as there are not any wrong versions, unless your line tries to go clockwise around the floor. The Bandera region was a “Texas cowboy experience” tourist mecca, and in the 1940s, cowboy iconography was everywhere: movies, clothing, radio shows, etc. That means you have a dance hall full of people of all ages, from all walks of life, and probably few who can actually dance. Square dancing being rather intimidating, the hall owners encouraged the patrons to get on the floor in lines and do some basic simple hop, skip, kick steps.

Without the beginner’s terror of facing a partner and trying to coordinate steps, a novice experienced the security of multiple people beside you, some—if not all—learning the steps as you moved around the floor counter-clockwise. This got a larger quantity of patrons (Everyone do the Cotton-Eyed Joe!) on the floor dancing and having a good time, buying more drinks, and coming back the next evening. This also helped the shyer folks get closer to even shyer folks and you know, you might never have met that special person “Ef it hadn’t a-been for Cotton-Eyed Joe.”

Thanks to unintended distribution by soldiers and tourists, the Cotton-Eyed Joe began getting played on radio stations and jukeboxes throughout the U.S. This was the foundation of a standard dance hall tune that is played at probably several dozen different venues across the U.S. every night of the year 75 years later (and a lot more on Saturday night)! Every band with a fiddle player worth his talcum powder was expected to know it, as well as “The Orange Blossom Special.”

The obscurity of the lyrics’ origin has lent it to numerous variations through the decades. Burl Ives included a folk music, non-danceable, version on his first four-record 78 rpm set in 1941. Bob Wills had found the lyrics and it was the focus of the song. In 1959, Nina Simone purred a sultry slow, bluesy version

of the lyrics; the following year, Walter Brennan put his spoken word treatment to it ala Old Rivers. In 1967, Al Dean and the All Stars filled the jukeboxes, radios, and dance halls with a version that eschewed the usual lyrical interpretation and was a fiddle-driven song, without lyrics. Country bands started to include it in their set lists once again, as the Hofner version had faded with changing trends.

The version that most people now identify with was recorded by Isaac Payton Sweat. In 1980, country music changed with the release of *Urban Cowboy*. Sweat jumped on the bandwagon, releasing his groundbreaking version of the song, which encouraged audience participation in the unrecorded-until-then chorus: “Stepped in what? Bullsh*t!” Many dance hall bands included that line in their live performances for years, but didn’t record it, for two reasons: public image and record company morals.

During the late 1970s, a resurgence of Western Swing music took hold and the old songs were resurrected. Of course, some never really left the dance halls; the Hofner brothers were still on the road, packing dance halls doing one-night stands, five to seven nights a week, playing the Cotton Eyed Joe the original way.

During this time, Asleep at the Wheel began playing it as an instrumental and included it on their self-titled album in 1985. In 1992, the Irish roots band, The Chieftains (with Ricky Skaggs) cut a wonderful Irish reel/jig version. The following year, Bill Monroe & his Bluegrass Boys gave it the full bluegrass treatment, remaining faithful to the dance cadence, although a little faster as it’s played at the remaining seconds of the song at most dance halls.

The early ‘90s techno music craze couldn’t resist the infectious rhythm and words to I.P. Sweat’s version and a group called Black Lace produced an all-computer sounds version focusing on the use of the chorus. An even more unlikely group, Rednex, from Sweden, recorded a high energy, hayseed parody of the song, which actually charted and sold well in Europe.

The song has been recorded by over 130 artists since 1950. One of the few consistent lyrics is “I’da been married a long time ago, if it hadn’t a-been for Cotton-eyed Joe.” After that, the lyrics seem to vary according to the whims of the artist. But the lyrics take a back seat to the simple beat, which has allowed many folks to visit a dance floor and enjoy themselves, and that’s what Adolf Hofner and his music were all about.



Dancers from around the United States and points beyond gathered in Texas twice in 2017 for a tour of Texas dance halls, put on by Ray Benson and Asleep at the Wheel and benefiting Texas Dance Hall Preservation. In both the spring and fall, the band brought several hundred visitors from two dozen states together with a slew of terrific musicians along for an exciting couple of weeks in various parts of Central Texas. In addition to dances at some of the Lone Star State's most iconic halls, tour attendees had a variety of daytime activities to choose from, including dance lessons, a photography workshop, and daytime tours to even more "dance halls. A great time was had by all!

"We propose a toast ... from wherever you are, raise your glass or thumbs in the air. Here's to showing us a great time, Ray! It was contemporary life, but mixed with a cauldron full of German and Czech family history. God bless dance halls and honky-tonks everywhere! Thank God for Luckenbach ... and long live Asleep at the Wheel! Happy Trails, Y'all!"

Roger & Wendy Schutt
Grass Valley, California



Amber Digby at Peters Hacienda Hall



On October 29, 2017, Texas Dance Hall Preservation awarded the first Ray Benson Lifetime Achievement Award to the man himself, in recognition of his tireless promotion of authentic Texas music, artists, and dance halls over the past 40-plus years.



Ray Benson. All photos by Dave Norris