

This Day in History... March 6, 1905

Happy Birthday, Bob Wills

Western swing musician James Robert Wills was born on March 6, 1905, in Kosse, Texas. Wills developed his own brand of country music and was known as the “King of Western Swing.”

Born into a family of old-time fiddlers, it was only natural that music would play an important role in Wills’ life. The family owned a cotton farm, and everyone sang, danced, and played musical instruments when they weren’t working. When he was 16, Wills left his family and jumped on a freight train, wandering for several years. He eventually went to barber school and spent time working in a barber shop. Wills also continued to play his fiddle, participating in minstrel and medicine shows.

Wills soon played with a series of bands and started mixing the “rowdy city blues” of Bessie Smith and Emmett Miller with the more traditional styles he’d learned from his father. Hired to fiddle with the Fort Worth Doughboys, Wills made his first recording with the group in 1932 for RCA Victor. The following year he split from the Doughboys with his banjo-playing brother Johnnie Lee and vocalist Tommie Duncan to form his own group that became known as the Texas Playboys. For eight years they performed on a Tulsa, Oklahoma radio station, eventually gaining national popularity. In 1940, their song “New San Antonio Rose” sold a million copies and became their signature song.



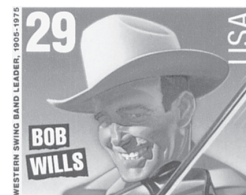
Wills Booklet Stamp

Combining the sounds of fiddling, blues, pop, big-band swing, and Mexican folk music Wills created a new pop-country style known as western swing. His recordings for American Record Company and Columbia, such as “Take Me Back to Tulsa”, “Faded Love”, and the “Spanish Two Step”, appealed to a far broader audience than old-time fiddling attracted. As western swing gained popularity, “Bill Wills” became a household name.

Beginning in 1940, Wills and his band appeared in their first Hollywood film, *Take Me Back to Oklahoma*. Wills appeared in a total of 19 movies over the years, including, *The Lone Prairie* (1942), *Riders of the Northwest Mounted* (1943), *Saddles and Sagebrush* (1943), *The Vigilantes Ride* (1943), *The Last Horseman* (1944), *Rhythm Round-Up* (1945), *Blazing the Western Trail* (1945), and *Lawless Empire* (1945). In 1942, several members left Wills band to join the war effort. The 37-year-old Wills joined the Army but was medically discharged the following year. He then moved to Hollywood and reformed the Texas Playboys. Many of his fans had moved there during the Great Depression and they had a daily radio broadcast regular weekend shows at the Mission Beach Ballroom in San Diego. Soon he was outselling and drawing larger crowds than top artists such as Tommy Dorsey and Benny Goodman. The band broke attendance records for a number of venues.

The band went on their first cross-country tour in 1944 and had their own syndicated radio show. In 1947, Wills opened his own nightclub in Sacramento. The band also played on the first broadcast of the famed *Louisiana Hayride* in 1948. Wills moved back to Oklahoma in 1949 and opened another club in Texas, though it was run by dishonest managers and Wills was left to pay the back taxes. To make these payments he sold many assets, including the rights to “New San Antonio Rose.”

Wills continued to perform and record in the 1950s and 60s, though he no longer drew the large crowds he once he did. He also suffered two heart attacks and a stroke forced him to slow down. Despite his failing health, he appeared for his induction into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1968. A tribute album by Merle Haggard help generate new interest in Wills’ music in the 1970s, leading to a reunion album. Wills died on May 13, 1975. He and his band were later inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and given a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award in 2007.



From the 1993 Country Music Legends Issue



The American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers honored Wills in 1972.

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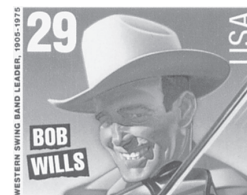
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