

W. LEE O'DANIEL AND HIS HILLBILLY BOYS

W. Lee O'Daniel's musical career began in January 1931, when a West Texas fiddler named James Robert (Bob) Wills^{qv} entered his Fort Worth office at Burrus Mill and Elevator Company. As general manager of the firm, O'Daniel had just canceled a radio program on which Wills and his fiddle band had been advertising Burrus Mill's Light Crust Flour. O'Daniel canceled it, as he said, "because I didn't like their hillbilly music." So many cards and letters came into station KFJZ that O'Daniel had to put the show back on the air, and the band became known as the Light Crust Doughboys.

When O'Daniel realized how much flour the show was selling, he became the announcer for the show and manager of the band. According to Wills, O'Daniel was an asset to the show. He had a flair for dramatization and publicity; he wrote poems and read them on the air and often had the band work out music for them. Though his songs never became national hits, they became known throughout Texas and the Southwest. He wrote "Beautiful Texas," "Put Me in Your Pocket," and a song for Franklin D. Roosevelt's war on the Great Depression, "On to Victory Mr. Roosevelt" (all in 1933).

The Doughboy broadcast became one of the most popular and long-lived shows in the history of the Southwest. The original Light Crust Doughboy show consisted of O'Daniel as announcer, Bob Wills on fiddle, Herman Arnsperger on guitar, and Milton Brown as vocalist. By the mid-1930s all had left the Doughboys, and each eventually had an important place in Texas music.

In 1935 Burrus Mill fired O'Daniel, and he organized his own band, the Hillbilly Boys, and his own flour company, W. Lee O'Daniel Flour Company, manufacturers of Hillbilly Flour. Between September 1935 and December 1938 O'Daniel and the Hillbilly Boys did six recording sessions for Vocalion (later part of Columbia Records). Some of their recordings were far from hillbilly music; in general, they represent some of the best western swing that any band in the Fort Worth-Dallas area ever recorded. As a vocalist, Leon Huff was at his best on these recordings, consistently better than when he later recorded for Bob and Johnnie Lee Wills. Kitty Williamson, whom O'Daniel called Texas Rose, vocalized on several recordings. She was probably the first female singer in western swing; her recording of "Baby Won't You Please Come Home" was in the Bessie Smith tradition and was vocalized western swing at its best.

Although some of his recordings were hillbilly, it was on his radio shows that O'Daniel promoted a hillbilly façade. His famous "Pass the Biscuits Pappy" smacked of the hillbilly and made the show, Hillbilly Flour, and O'Daniel popular. He read poems and gave brief lectures on morality,

most of which he never practiced, according to his musicians. O'Daniel had bigger and more important things in mind than his hillbilly music, however. In 1938 he became a candidate for governor of Texas. He was probably the first candidate anywhere in the nation to use a fiddle band (or perhaps any kind of a band) as a principal part of a political campaign. He toured the state with his Hillbilly Boys, who began his rallies by playing "Beautiful Texas" (which O'Daniel strategically recorded the year before). After the band drew the crowd, O'Daniel gave a campaign speech. Then he sent members of his family and the band into the audience with miniature flour barrels to accept campaign contributions. The method was successful, though no one will ever know how much so, since the donations were all in cash.

When he was elected governor, O'Daniel took his Hillbilly Boys with him to Austin and got all of them jobs with the state. For example, Kermit Whalin, a barber, became a state barber inspector. The musicians broadcast a show from the Governor's Mansion^{qv} on Sundays, and so continued to build the image of Governor O'Daniel and keep his name before the people. Most of the musicians never saw the inside of the mansion; they played the show on the front porch and were never invited inside. When O'Daniel's daughter, Molly, married, he sent band member Jim Boyd and his wife an engraved invitation, but Boyd said, "They stopped us at the church door and wouldn't let us in." When O'Daniel became a United States senator, he insisted that the band go with him to Washington but refused to tell them what salary they would receive. If they refused to go, they lost their state jobs immediately, and Jim Boyd was even evicted from his state-owned home. Practically every musician who played for O'Daniel believed he was selfish, unfair, and extremely ruthless. Aside from his politics and his personal qualities, O'Daniel was important in the music of Texas when it was in its formative years. Without his remarkable ability to promote and publicize, the innovative music of the Light Crust Doughboys might never have gained such vast popularity, and men like Bob Wills might have been known only in North and Central Texas. As governor, O'Daniel made the world aware that there was a distinctive Texas sound and that music was important enough to help a flour salesman attain the highest office in the state.

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