

The story of the Hillbilly Boys is linked inextricably with the story of W. Lee O'Daniel, flour salesman, entrepreneur, music promoter, governor of Texas, and United States Senator. It is also strongly linked to the story of Border Radio – powerful radio stations located on the Mexican side of the U.S. - Mexico border which broadcast programming primarily directed at the United States audience in order to circumvent FCC regulations. Because of these strong links, we will have separate discussions of W. Lee O'Daniel's career and of Border Radio. The discussion here is specifically directed to the Hillbilly Boys themselves.

Despite their name, the Hillbilly Boys was a premier Texas Swing or Western Swing band. While they could, and did, play “old timey” music, their repertoire included a mix of folk, country, jazz, swing, pop, blues, and even classical music. They were formed in Fort Worth, Texas in 1935 to promote the W. Lee O'Daniel Flour Company's brand of flour, Hillbilly Flour, and they appeared on radio and in concert, and had 6 recording sessions from 1935 to 1938, producing (as described by the Handbook of Texas Online) “some of the best western swing that any band in the Fort Worth-Dallas area ever recorded”. Their radio broadcasts were heard over a network of radio stations in Texas and surrounding states, and later from border blaster radio stations in Mexico that were powerful enough to send their signal across the United States and beyond. The Hillbilly Boys were so popular that people who didn't live in areas where Hillbilly Flour was sold would send in money to help keep them on the air. They helped propel their manager, W. Lee O'Daniel, into the position of governor of Texas, and, later, into the United States Senate. Unfortunately for the band, O'Daniel was such a strong figure that he wound up overshadowing them, and the Hillbilly Boys tend to be a small note in the story of O'Daniel, rather than being celebrated in their own right. Information about the band after 1938, when O'Daniel moved into the field of politics, is minimal, and it is difficult to even find out when they finally disbanded.

In 1931, W. Lee “Please Pass the Biscuits, Pappy” O'Daniel, on behalf of Burrus Mill & Elevator Company of Fort Worth, Texas, sponsored the trio that became the “Light Crust Doughboys”. He became the manager, announcer, and front-man for the band and, although he neither sang nor played an instrument, he became the most recognizable member. After some of the original members left and started billing themselves as “formerly the Light Crust Doughboys”, O'Daniel stopped giving on-air credit to the musicians and started giving them nicknames instead, both to cover up inevitable personnel changes and to prevent any individual member from building up a personal following while with the band. This also had the effect of pushing him more to the forefront since his was the only real name that the public knew.

In 1935, Burrus Mills fired O'Daniel, and he started up his own flour company, the W. Lee O'Daniel Flour Company, with Hillbilly Flour as its premium brand of flour. The flour bags were distinctive, with the symbol of a goat on the front, and a poem penned by O'Daniel himself:

HILLBILLY Music on the air,
HILLBILLY Flour everywhere;
It tickles your feet – it tickles your tongue,
Wherever you go, Its Praises are sung.

On the backs of at least some of the bags would be a cartoon-y picture of a member of the band along with instructions on how to make it into a stuffed doll. In some cases, families wouldn't turn the flour bags into stuffed dolls, but made them into clothing for the children.

From his experience with the Doughboys, O'Daniel knew the power of radio and a good band to help promote and sell flour, so he formed "The Hillbilly Boys", which actually drew a number of its members from the Doughboys. Continuing his practice started with the Doughboys, "Pappy" called the members of the new band by nicknames. Since the billing for the band was quite often "W. Lee O'Daniel & His Hillbilly Boys", especially for radio broadcasts, O'Daniel was, once again, the most recognizable member.

Right from the start, the Hillbilly Boys radio show was broadcast over the Texas Quality Network, a network of radio stations to broadcast throughout Texas and much of Oklahoma which was set up by O'Daniel to broadcast the Light Crust Doughboys when he was still with Burrus Mills. Starting in November 1935, O'Daniel would bring the Hillbilly Boys down to Eagle Pass, Texas, where they would broadcast over the Piedras Negras border radio station, XEPN, doing 8 shows a day and sending transcribed shows back to the TQN during the winter broadcasting season, and then move back to Fort Worth. The Hillbilly Boys quickly proved to be very popular with the listening public, with Pappy delivering folksy, down-home homilies and poems, and the Hillbilly Boys delivering some excellent music. Demand for Hillbilly Flour rose, and people who weren't able to buy Hillbilly Flour would send in money to help keep the shows on the air. O'Daniel would return the money with thanks, saying that he didn't believe in accepting any money he didn't earn. When O'Daniel later ran for Texas Governor, he did accept contributions for his campaign.

Between 1935 and 1938, W. Lee O'Daniel and His Hillbilly Boys did six recording sessions for Vocalion. Kitty Williamson (a.k.a. "Texas Rose") was featured on some of the recordings, becoming probably the first female singer in Western Swing. Although most of the recordings were far from being "hillbilly" music, on the radio show O'Daniel cultivated a "good old boy" hillbilly facade, and his "please pass the biscuits, Pappy" slogan, his reading of simple poems written by him, and his brief lectures on morality cemented the image of his being an entrepreneur who cared for and could be trusted by "common folk".

In the spring of 1938, O'Daniel and a small group of his business friends came up with a new marketing idea for Hillbilly Flour: have Pappy throw his hat in the ring for governor of Texas. On April 10, 1938, O'Daniel casually remarked on a broadcast that a blind man had suggested he run for governor, to "clean up the mess in Austin." He asked his radio audience to advise him, and, according to O'Daniel, he received 55,000 responses. The story goes that all but 3 or 4 of the responses said that he should run; the remaining 3 or 4 said that he shouldn't run because he was "too good to go into politics". And, so, O'Daniel announced on May 1 that he would be running for governor. Pappy used the Hillbilly Boys radio program to promote his campaign and to raise campaign funds, and he took the Hillbilly Boys on the campaign trail with him, probably marking the first time that a band of any sort was used as a principal part of a political campaign. At a typical campaign rally, the Hillbilly Boys would play songs and Pappy would speak on his campaign promises, with the band playing appropriate songs throughout, and would put in a plug for Hillbilly Flour. If someone asked O'Daniel a question that he couldn't answer, or that he didn't want to answer, he would get the band to strike up a tune. At the end of the rally, O'Daniel would send family and band members into the audience with miniature flour barrels labelled "Flour Not Pork" to collect donations. With his campaign motto of the Golden Rule, his platform of the Ten Commandments, and his straightforward acknowledgement that he was running in order to sell more flour, O'Daniel and the Hillbilly Boys travelled 20,000 miles all across Texas during the six weeks of the campaign. The voters liked his friendly, down-homey style,

and he was elected governor with nearly 51% of the vote.

At some point after his election as governor, Pappy turned the reins of the flour company over to his sons, Pat and Mike, and Pat was given nominal command of the Hillbilly Boys. However, O'Daniel did maintain an interest in both the band and the company, and in January, 1939, the Hillbilly Boys, in addition to their regular broadcasts, started doing a weekly Sunday evening broadcast from the Governor's Mansion, featuring Pappy himself.

In spite of his caring public image, most of the musicians who worked for O'Daniel believed that he was selfish, unfair, and extremely ruthless. Although the Hillbilly Boys were broadcasting weekly from the Governor's Mansion, most never saw beyond the room they broadcast from since O'Daniel never invited them in. When O'Daniel's daughter, Molly, got married, one band member was turned away at the church door in spite of having an engraved invitation from O'Daniel.

When O'Daniel ran for re-election as governor in 1940, a major split happened in the band: Leon "the Texas Songbird" Huff, and Kermit "Horace the Little Love Bird" Whalin left the band. Leon had been with O'Daniel's band since the days of The Light Crust Doughboys, and was the real leader of the band, and Kermit had been with the Hillbilly Boys for a long time as well. They left over a dispute with O'Daniel when they realized that the raise he had long promised them was never coming, going so far as to actively campaign for one of O'Daniel's rivals. In spite of this, O'Daniel managed to get re-elected.

1940 may also have marked the end of Hillbilly Flour. When O'Daniel first became governor, he turned the leadership of his flour company and the Hillbilly Boys over to his sons, Pat and Mike. They, however, were not as good at promotion as Pappy was. A big promotion of theirs that failed was the tithe certificates that came with each sack of flour sold: each certificate turned over to a church entitled the church to a share of 10% of the Hillbilly Flour profits. In 1940, the boys declared that the company had lost a lot of money due to reaction to an unpopular policy of their father's. They still sent out tithes, thanks to Pappy giving them 10% of his salary as governor to use for this, but churches wound up receiving cheques ranging from 5 cents to \$24, with the average amount sent being \$1.43. To make things worse, Time Magazine reported nationally on this failed promotion. Without Pappy at the helm, the company was faltering.

For the last few years of the band's existence, its principal function seemed to be to advance O'Daniel's political career. In 1941, O'Daniel ran in a special election for the U.S. Senate when the senator for Texas unexpectedly died mid-term. Once again, he took the Hillbilly Boys on the campaign trail, and once again he was met with electoral success. With his election to the Senate, O'Daniel insisted that the band members come with him, without telling them what their salary would be. If a band member balked at coming, they were not only dropped from the band, but they immediately lost the State jobs that O'Daniel had set them up with when he became governor, and, in at least one case, were immediately evicted from the state-owned housing they were living in. In 1942, O'Daniel took the Hillbilly Boys on the election trail again and was re-elected. In D.C., the senators had a small recording studio in the Senate Office Building where they could record messages to be sent back to their home states for broadcast, and the Hillbilly Boys would record there for O'Daniel. It is not clear if the band disbanded while he was in the Senate, or if it continued with him until he left the Senate in 1948. Whichever it was, O'Daniel had no further need for the band when he realized that he couldn't get re-elected in 1948, and, thus, did not run.

In 1952, when O'Daniel tried an unsuccessful run for the presidency, and in 1956 and 1958, when he tried running for governor again, O'Daniel went out on the campaign trail with a new "hillbilly band" each time, but it isn't clear if any of these new bands were given the name "The Hillbilly Boys". In any event, his message no longer appealed to the masses, and none of the new bands outlasted the campaign.

Over the years, the Hillbilly Boys had many fine musicians pass through their ranks, with some leaving to form their own bands or to play in others, and some leaving due to difficulties in working with O'Daniel. Some of the musicians that were members at one point or another were:

Leon Huff, "The Texas Songbird," vocals and lead guitar;
Darrell Kirkpatrick, "Klondike," fiddle;
J. Eldon "June" Whalin, "Jerry the Love Bird," guitar;
Connie Galvin, "Pancho," bass;
Clifford Wells, "Uncle Cliffie," tenor banjo;
Ray Lundy, steel guitar;
Carroll Hubbard, "Little Caesar the Fiddle Teaser," fiddle;
Pat "Patty Boy" O'Daniel, tenor banjo;
Mike "Mickey Wickey" O'Daniel, fiddle;
Kitty Williamson, "Texas Rose," vocals and second fiddle;
Bundy "Little Ezra" Bratcher, vocal harmony and accordion;
Curly Perrin, vocals and guitar;
Lee Searcy, vocals and guitar;
Lefty Perkins, electric steel guitar;
Wallace Griffin, also called "Klondike," bass;
Kermit Whalen, "Happy Horace," steel guitar;
Ray Lundy, steel guitar;
Jim Boyd, vocals.

Pat and Mike were O'Daniel's sons.

The bulk of the Hillbilly Boys shows included in this distribution come from 1939 when leadership of the band had been given over to Pat O'Daniel. The format of the show is similar in all of the shows here, but is not necessarily an indication of the format followed when W. Lee O'Daniel was in charge. The shows are all 15 minutes long, and start with an announcer saying "Once again, the W. Lee O'Daniel Flour Company of Fort Worth, Texas, is proud to present its president Pat O'Daniel and His Original Hillbilly Boys", followed by a modified version of a song written by W. Lee O'Daniel, "Million Dollar Smile":

A million dollar smile,
It's the latest thing in style.
It's in my walk and it's in my talk
And it's with me all the while.
I said skidoo to those hard-time blues,
And from here on out I'm a-smilin' through.
I'm a happy child and I'm running wild

And the Hillbilly Boys are on the air.

This was followed immediately by Leon singing a modified version of another O'Daniel song, "Please Pass the Biscuits, Pappy":

I like mountain music, good old mountain music,
Played by the real Hillbilly Band.
I like bread and biscuits, big white fluffy biscuits.
Hillbilly Flour sure makes them grand.
So while we sing and play and try to make folks happy,
We hope you'll say, "Please pass the biscuits, Pappy."
For a quarter hour, we'll boost Hillbilly Flour,
O'Daniel and His Hillbilly Band.

Pat O'Daniel would then announce the first song. Songs were interspersed with testimonial letters from Hillbilly Flour users, readings of poems written by "Pappy" O'Daniel, and one major commercial extolling the virtues of Hillbilly Flour. In almost every show, Leon would at some point call out the slogan, "Please pass the biscuits, Pappy". If Pat was going to be featured playing a piece on his banjo, "Mickey Wickey" (his brother Mike) would step up to the microphone to announce it. The band would hoot and holler throughout the show, playing up the "hillbilly", "good old boy" image of the band, but, as with the music from their recording sessions, the music they played included some excellent western swing. The commercials were very down-homey, and would usually play up the health benefits of Hillbilly Flour, in one case comparing eating food made from other inferior flour to being executed in prison, with the major difference being that being executed is over quicker.

At the end of each show, the band would play another modified version of "Please Pass the Biscuits, Pappy":

I like mountain music, good old mountain music,
Played by the real Hillbilly Band.
I like bread and biscuits, big white fluffy biscuits.
Hillbilly Flour sure makes them grand.
So while we sing and play and try to make folks happy,
We hope you'll say, "Please pass the biscuits, Pappy."
When you're feeling better, write us a card or letter,
O'Daniel and His Hillbilly Band.

and the announcer would usually invite listeners to tune in again next time.

The shows are not slick and polished as so many other radio music programs of that time were, but the unvarnished approach can be refreshing, and there is no denying the talent of the musicians. So sit back and enjoy "some of the best western swing that any band in the Fort Worth-Dallas area ever recorded".