

Clinic: Western Swing

presented by Randy Sabien, with assistance from Ben Kroeger, violin, and Kyle Baker, guitar

reported by Faith Farr

Randy Sabien presented a wonderful mixture of the history and development of Western Swing style, and lead teachers in performing many tunes. His students Ben Kroeger, violin, and Kyle Baker, guitar, from McNally Smith College of Music provided backup, and accompanied Randy in demonstration of the mastered style. The notes below are from Randy's extensive handout.

Of all the “alternative” styles that are available to string players, the genre of western swing is perhaps the most diverse. You will hear strains of Mexican mariachi, blues, old time fiddle music, ragtime, boogie-woogie, big band jazz, small combo swing, Tin Pan Alley songwriting, country, and cowboy tunes. It is also one of the few styles that virtually requires a fiddle (or two or three) and was created, driven, and developed by fiddle players—Bob Wills being the most notable. (Other fiddle styles were adapted to fiddle from piano or wind band origins.) Part of the reason for this was simply geography. Bob Wills being from Texas put him in close proximity to Mexico, New Orleans, Oklahoma, California (Hollywood—when westerns were popular on the silver screen), Kansas City, the western mountain ranges and that rich culture blended together musically creating a unique style that few east of the Mississippi were aware of at the time.

Instrumentation consisted of drums, bass, piano, guitar, twin, triple, (or more!) fiddles, lap steel guitar, electric guitar, horns, electric mandolin, banjo, accordion and vocals. It was the country equivalent of the Big Band and featured hot solos and lots of jamming over very hip chord changes and swinging dance grooves. Spade Cooley outdid everyone by adding classical harp and 2 basses and 2 accordions resulting in some very schmaltzy sounds that one can only marvel at today.

Mexico

It was from Mexico that Bob Willis may have grabbed the concept of multiple fiddles. *Peor es Nada* is a representative tune.

Fiddle

Bob called his group a “Texas fiddle band” though it was actually Spade Cooley who coined the term “western swing.” *Crippled Turkey* is a representative tune.

Blues

Like everything else the blues is always there.

For instance, *Milk Cow Blues*, *Baby That Sure Would Go Good* or *Big Beaver*.

Swing

Western swing groups incorporated song forms from the jazz world such as rhythm changes and covered jazz standards. For instance *Undecided*, *Miss Molly*, or *That's What I Like About the South*.

Classic Western Swing tunes

Examples are *Maiden's Prayer*, *San Antonio Rose*, *Roly Poly* and *Can't Go On This Way*.

Cowboy tunes

Sons of the Pioneers not only featured great vocal harmonies but a smoking fiddler named Karl Farr. His brother played guitar and they rivaled Joe Venuti/Eddie Lang and Stephane Grappelli/Django Reinhardt for the ability to swing hard on violin and guitar. Yodeling was an essential ingredient in the vocals. Sample tunes are *Sagebrush Symphony*, *Tumbling Tumbleweeds*, *El Cajon Stomp* and *Churning Butter*.

Boogie woogie

Boogie woogie piano was a musical craze that dominated the scene for a brief period of time. The first Blue Note release was four hands piano by Meade Lux Lewis and Albert Ammons. Everyone rushed to capitalize on the opportunities and western swing musicians didn't miss a beat. Check out *3-Way Boogie* by Spade Cooley who is a class all his own. His career had a tragic ending—google him and one of the first links you find is the Crime Library. He wrote a tune named after his wife Ella—*Spadella*—which is kind of a western swing meets klezmer. But it sure does swing!

Resources:

For books about Western Swing, try *Southwest Shuffle* by Rich Kienzle, a history of the genre. *San Antonio Rose* by Charles Townsend is an excellent biography of Bob

Wills. For music in Western Swing style try:

- *Western Swing Fiddle*, Stacy Phillips, stacyphillips.com
- *Twin Fiddle*, Stacy Phillips, Mel Bay
- *Mariachi Philharmonic*, Bob Phillips/John Nieto, Alfred Publishing
- *Rhythm Guitar the Ranger Doug Way*, Doug Green, Centerstream Publishing

Listen:

- Carolina Cotton
- Milton Brown and his Musical Brownies
- Light Crust Doughboys
- Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys
- Time Jumpers
- Asleep at the Wheel
- Paul Anastasio
- Randy Elmore
- Johnny Gimble
- Buddy Spicher/Calvin Vollrath
- Spade Cooley
- Farr Brothers
- Quebe Sisters

At age 21, Randy Sabien founded the String Department at the Berklee College of Music (1978). He hit the road as a sideman with Rock and Roll Hall of Fame singer/songwriter Jim Post in 1981. Randy's first jazz album was released in 1983 and he has been touring the nation as a performer with his own groups, appearing as guest soloist with symphony orchestras, and leading workshops for jazz strings for 35 years. He co-wrote the Jazz Philharmonic series with Bob Phillips and is an Alfred Music composer. Randy is currently head of the string department at McNally Smith College of Music in St. Paul. His college ensemble “Rhythm and Bows” won first place in the college group division at the 2012 ASTA Eclectic Strings Festival and took Grand Prize for overall best group. He was the featured guest performer at the 2013 ASTA conference. †