

Only A Memory Away - The Dave and Vi Stogner Story

(A history of his music and their romance)

FOREWORD

By Tom Miller

It could have been disconcerting for the young fiddle player on the stage. Early evening in an empty honky-tonk, it's still light out. It's the beginning of the 1980's and we are in the middle of the Urban Cowboy scare. "Hat Acts" were all the rage at that time, too. Resistol rock and roll babies are playing Country music to thin air. The front door is open--there is no way to stop the momentum of Dave Stogner's entrance. The erect sixty-something cowboy with the square jaw marches directly to the middle of the sunken dance floor at O.T. Price's Music Hall and kneels, elbow on higher knee, hand on chin, eyes fixed on young fiddle player. Rodin's "Thinker," Stogner's "Fiddle Contemplator." No sense being rattled. The fiddler played right to the chiseled Western Swing bandleader. If there is a big linebacker you might as well run right at him, if you can't get around him. Stogner was not moving.

My attention turned to making sure we had enough Jack Daniels and beer stocked for the night--bartending was my intro to the concert coordinating business. A few minutes later Dave walked directly toward me at the bar, wearing a Texas sized grin spanning Waco to Juarez. The fiddle player that night would do just fine.

I was in my late twenties and loved all kinds of music, except most produced pop stuff. I especially loved the Grateful Dead and Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys. It made sense to me at some point in my life that these were and are my favorite bands, although I am not sure at the time that I could connect them in any way--I just loved the music. Later I put it to reason: the Dead melded so many styles of music--country, folk, bluegrass, disco, blues, soul, jazz, classical and cowboy-- into their sound, all under an umbrella of rock and roll dance music. Bob Wills blended Dixieland, Mexican, jazz, blues, folk, polkas, waltzes, old-time string band and cowboy music, all under an umbrella of Western Swing dance music. Roots music, melody, diversity, a driving beat, dance music, rich imagery in the lyrics--I'm engaged. There was also a dynamic with their audiences--tie-dyed or western wear. The Dead played to a huge underground following, selling more tickets than any other touring band. Bob Wills played to devoted fans throughout the South, and, I have heard, drew more people to his dances every year than the more famous Big Bands--Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey and Glenn Miller.

Dave Stogner was my time machine. So many nights at two in the morning, after Dave's band played an encore and I disinfected the last whiskey glass, we headed

to an all-night dinner to wind down, just him and I. His band went home. They got to experience Dave's swing standing next to him on stage. They didn't need the stories.

Joe Holley was Dave's best friend as far as I could tell. Joe played with Bob Wills during the glory years of Bob's touring and recording. The fiddles on the classic Wills' recordings belong to Jesse Ashlock and Joe. Dave and he were lifelong friends. Dave told me they played professional minor league baseball together. They played music together. They started in Texas and ended up in Fresno. In the depression they always had cash in their pocket. They could afford a good suit and dinner, even if they could not afford to buy a house. Many depression era folks struggled to keep the houses they owned and could not afford a good meal and a cowboy shirt with fancy piping. Dave and Joe still had to be thrifty, though. Visiting radio shows--possibly ones sponsored by the ubiquitous flour companies of the time--they would encounter pay toilets at the stations. They had the drill down. One of them went over the top of the stall and opened the door. Forty years later when Dave helped me book Joe Holley and The All Stars into O.T. Price's Music Hall, I tried to imagine Holley, the old lefty with lumbago, who extended his bowing motion on the fiddle almost to the floor, scrambling over a stall wall.

I booked O.T. Price's Music Hall for ten years. The Count Basie Orchestra, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Los Lobos, Albert King, the Kingston Trio, and many others played our stage. But I will never forget the first night that Joe Holley and the All Stars played. Joe played twin fiddles with another fine player, Rip Van Winkle. Alex Brashear, who Dave said was the arranger for the Bob Wills band, was on trumpet. Dave told me that Alex was the only horn man to stay on during the war when Bob Wills had to drop the rest of the horns. Alex got to stay because he arranged the songs. Joe's band played right out of the Wills' songbook. I watched and listened with tears in my eyes as they played the classics--real Bob Wills guys on our stage. Ray Benson and Paul Anastasio, lead singer and fiddler of Asleep at the Wheel, and Wayne Goodwin, fiddler for Emmy Lou Harris' Hot Band, sat in that night. Five incredible fiddlers were on hand, rotating on and off the stage--twin and triple fiddles raged.

There was also a big, quiet man that came in that night with a guitar case. I don't know to this day who he was. But Dave said the man was a terrific player like Eldon Shamblin, the guitar pioneer of Bob Wills' band. Years later at the Strawberry Music Festival, after Dave and Joe and Alex all passed on, I went back stage for the first time in the many years I attended the event nestled in the meadows near Yosemite. I don't care who is playing, backstage reminds me of work and cranky road managers and I usually don't go there when I am out to enjoy a concert. By this time I had organized thousands of concerts featuring marquis names and, while I have often ended up enjoying meeting the stars of the show, it is rarely something I am initially excited about. Like meeting anyone new, the real excitement comes when experiencing someone who is engaging and interesting. Until I know what the musician is like as a person I can be indifferent, it's work, it's my job, the legendary musicians are simply part of the equation. I am Joe Friday on the job—"just the facts Ma'am." Okay, okay, perhaps I am

posturing myself as way too music-biz cool to go through the angst of fawning around well-known musicians.

I was not cool that night at the Strawberry Music Festival. I cared very much who was playing and felt like a Beatle groupie circa 1965 approaching Paul McCartney. After years of hearing Dave Stogner's stories about the heyday of Western Swing and the key players, I felt a deep affinity for these guys and I wanted to meet them. I also wanted to re-connect with Dave, with his spirit. The Playboys were all dressed in sharp white shirts with red, white, and blue ascots and brand new cowboy hats. They were tall, or maybe it just seemed that way to me as I approached them. I was three days unshaven and my long hair was undisciplined. Strawberry is a camping festival and I had used that as an excuse not to use their perfectly fine showers. I wore Guatemalan shorts pulled over threadbare dusty black sweatpants. It was in this condition that I burst into the circle of regal Texans and proclaimed: "I think you Bob Wills guys were the best all-around band in American history."

They seemed to be okay with that. I told them about the various gigs I produced with Dave Stogner, Joe Holley and Alex Brashear. Herb Remington--one of the pedal steel guitar greats with the Wills' band (the other being Leon McAuliffe), gave me his card, said lets do some business someday. They all were friendly and gracious. After chatting for a while, I asked about Eldon Shamblin. Herb quietly pointed to a Buddha-like presence wearing a cowboy hat sitting just a few feet away in a white tent. I froze. I remembered Dave Stogner telling me about the mysterious guest at the first Joe Holley show at O.T. Price's Music Hall--the big guy with the guitar case--a man who he compared to the great Eldon Shamblin. Now here was Eldon Shamblin himself, a few feet away with a stern look on his face. Herb said to go in and say hello. Ah, but there was a stern look to deal with and this was Eldon Shamblin. Dave Stogner was a hero as well as a friend to me so his heroes were my heroes. But this one looked grumpy and I looked frumpy. I wasn't moving yet. Herb said it was okay--go on in. I went up to Eldon in his chair and introduced myself. Eldon reached up and took my hand with both of his and smiled the warmest smile. Dave was in that smile, too. This smile meant so much because Dave had laid the foundation for me--he had made sure I knew Eldon's place in the pantheon of great guitar players. Eldon is considered a pioneer of Country guitar, although there was jazz in his swing too. Eldon and I connected. We talked until he was ready to go on stage. I carried his guitar for him and I met him after the Playboys II played a stellar set. He came right to me and we picked up where we left off before the show. Finally, after about a half hour the road manager came to get him. I shook Eldon's hand one more time as he held onto my hand, again with both of his, and continued telling me stories. As the road manager shuffled Eldon away, we walked along talking for about a hundred yards, kind of sideways, Eldon's hands still shaking mine.

Jazz. Dave told me many a time that the great Western Swing musicians considered themselves jazz musicians, not country pickers. Joe Holley and Dave admired Stephan Grapelli. They grew up listening to Stephan Grapelli. Oddly enough, it was also Dave that knocked me off my high horse when it came to what I considered corny Country. I wanted to hear Western Swing and old honky-

tonk, jukebox Country like Hank Williams, Hank Thompson, Hank Snow; or anyone else named Hank. He directed me to listen again to Conway Twitty with new ears, and I discovered a beautiful voice.

Coca-Cola is everywhere and everywhere I go I remember Dave Stogner because of that. It was Coca-Cola that sponsored Dave's Saturday TV show from The Fresno Barn. Dave told me he was obligated to say something nice about the dark brown, bubbly stuff and one day found himself at the microphone unprepared and the only thing he could think to say was "Things go better with Coke." Dave said a company representative in the audience wrote that one down. The world heard about it for years and years. Dave said he was in essence working at the time for Coca-Cola and he said he was not entitled to any residuals. I remember Dave singing *Put a Nickel in the Jukebox*. Imagine the kitty if Dave got a nickel every time we heard "Things go better with Coke."

I was lucky enough to have tapes of Dave Stogner's great Decca LP *Western Dance in Hi-Fi* before those songs were reissued on Cattle Records. Thanks to my friendship with Vi Stogner, who I am convinced will be Dave's true love for eternity; I am fortunate to have tapes and CDs of Dave now. I still go into high gear when I listen to Dave and Joe playing *Black Cat Stomp* and shed a tear when I hear Dave singing *When My Dreamboat Comes Home*. I am sure each time I roll the tape he is singing it to Viola--even now, and forever."