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BOOK REVIEW OF "BOB WILLS: HUBBIN' IT"

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and whether the spaces where it can be listened and danced to will become more appropriate spaces for a wider range of women. All in all, the book is quite captivating and draws the reader into full emotional contact with a popular, sad, and humorous musical form that might otherwise be inaccessible.

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Sheldon, Ruth. *Bob Wills: Hubbin' It*. Country Music Foundation: Nashville, 1995. 100 pp. \$14.95.

Hubbin' It, originally published by journalist Ruth Sheldon in 1938, remained the only real biography of Bob Wills until Charles Townsend published his *San Antonio Rose* in 1976. Sheldon's book was published privately, available only by mail order. She chronicles the life of Bob Wills from his humble beginnings as a farm boy through his rise to fame as one of the world's greatest fiddlers and band leaders. Sheldon was originally assigned to write a story on Wills for the *Tulsa Tribune*. Her boss told her to go investigate the man who gets a "thousand fan letters a week" due to the publicity generated from his radio shows and dance appearances (1). Sheldon found Wills so charming and invigorating that she decided his story should be told.

Willis was the son of a poor farm family. His father, also a fiddler, vowed to make his son a "fiddler" from the day he was born (5). Although as Wills grew up his interest in music was not as great as his family anticipated, he had a natural talent for playing. Sheldon tells the story of how as a young boy Wills picked up the fiddle for the first time and outplayed his thirty-five-year-old cousin Olford. After hearing Wills, Olford never "attempt[ed] to play the fiddle" again (11). Wills was always a hard worker and never shied away from hard labor. As a young man of sixteen, he went out in search of work and a better life. Wills did not find a better life, but he did occasionally find work on someone's farm, making one or two dollars a day. Working as a cotton picker at the age of seventeen, Wills felt the "call" to become a preacher. He had a family willing to sponsor him to go to seminary, but his "ancient pride" and "craving for independence" to make a life on his own terms, with no handouts, kept him from studying to become a Bible preacher (20).

Wills did not initially consider becoming a full-time musician. He would occasionally play a dance or a party. However, his reputation as one of the best fiddlers around preceded him and he was constantly being asked to play dances. While working as a barber, Wills decided to take music lessons to see if he could improve his playing, but he soon became dissatisfied with this because "he could play so much better than

his teacher" (43). His reputation as a great fiddler followed him even as he tried to make a living as a barber in Turkey, Texas. Eventually he realized that perhaps he could make a living as a musician. In 1929 when a medicine show came to Turkey, Wills was offered a job as part of the show. He worked for several years in medicine shows but found this life less than satisfying musically and professionally. Then Wills put together a small band and began playing thirty-minute radio spots, usually sponsoring some product. His band traveled around and played in a wide variety of places, including Ft. Worth and Tulsa. As his fame spread, he was asked to play dances all over the Southwest.

Sheldon chronicles Wills's problems with the Burrus Mills company, located in Ft. Worth. Wills's band, the Light Crust Doughboys, played radio spots for Burrus Mills and was very successful. Eventually Wills and owner W. Lee O'Daniel had a dispute over money. Wills put together a new band and went to Waco, where he played dances and advertised his band as "formerly the Light Crust Doughboys." Burrus Mills tried to sue Wills for \$10,000 for copyright infringement, but lost.

Wills continued to play on radio and for dances and made Tulsa his home base. He expanded his band to as many as twelve members, changed his band's name to the Texas Playboys, added some brass, and, by doing so, inadvertently created the style known as Western Swing. In 1938, when *Hubbin' It* was published, Wills was well on his way to national stardom and fame. His personal charm and outstanding musicianship made him a popular player; people would travel from miles around to dance to his music. At the time *Hubbin' It* was written, Wills had no intention of staying in music for the rest of his life. He wanted to retire before "the public has a chance to tire of him" (91). He had planned to buy a big ranch and retire there with his family. As is known today, Wills never stopped playing until he died.

Charles Townsend, in the introduction, describes how *Hubbin' It* influenced his own work and calls it a "primary source and excellent outline of Wills's early life" (viii). *Hubbin' It* includes a reproduction of a letter written by the president of the Tulsa radio station KVOO to Wills in 1938. Musical transcriptions of Wills's songs "Spanish Two Step," "Maiden's Prayer," and "Oklahoma" are included. There are photographs of Wills throughout the years, including a reproduction of the original photograph that buyers of the book received as a bonus.

Sheldon credits the success of Bob Wills to his "determination and nerve" (61). He never gave up, no matter what trials and tribulations came his way. While *Hubbin' It* is not the scholarly tome Charles Townsend's *San Antonio Rose* is, it is still required reading for anyone interested in the fascinating tale of Wills's life. *Hubbin' It* is the result of

many hours of interviews with Wills and his family. Being a journalist, Sheldon knew how to capture the reader's attention with words. *Hubbin' It* reads like a novel and can be easily read in one sitting. This one is not to be missed.

Robert G. Weiner

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Ronald L. Smith. *Goldmine Comedy Record Price Guide*. Iola, Wisconsin: Krause Publications, 1996. Illustrated. 339 pp. Paperback \$22.95.

This volume is spectacular—a genuine goldmine of information about 20th-century comic genius available on sound recordings. It is superior in scope of coverage (1915-1996) to Warren Debenham's *Laughter on Record: A Comedy Discography* (Scarecrow Press, 1988) and a more valuable biographical resource than Joel Whitburn's abbreviated citations concerning *Billboard*-listed comedy albums in *Top Pop Albums, 1955-1996* (Record Research, 1996). Yet the book title is a misnomer. Biographer and historian Ronald L. Smith is neither proficient nor convincing about framing a price guide or assembling a detailed comedy discography. He's clearly a minor leaguer compared to Tim Neely, Neal Umphred, Jerry Osborne, or numerous other big-league compilers of vinyl inventories on contemporary recordings. Where Smith humbles his competitors, though, is in the realm of biographical detail and lyrical criticism. No comedy disc study rivals this volume for opinionated observations, comparative cross-references, and historical perspective. The lack of discographic detail and the arbitrary pricing suggestions verge on criminal behavior for a Krause publication. But the encyclopedic examinations of Bob and Ray, George Carlin, Peter Schickele (P. D. Q. Bach), and Weird Al Yankovic are invaluable for comedy fans.

This chocked-full-of-audio-nuts compilation is organized alphabetically by artist. The entries run from A & P Players, Patsy Abbott, Bud Abbott and Lou Costello, and Ace Trucking Company to Henny Youngman, John Zacherle, Bob Zany, and the Zoo. The author provides album titles, record numbers, and a four-star quality-of-performance rating system (highly subjective) and suggested album prices (also highly subjective). Smith does not suffer from a lack of self-confidence in assessing the cultural value, delivery styles, and creativity of either specific skits or individual comedians. The often lengthy accolades and diatribes disguised as objective entries are entertaining, enlightening, and articulate. In many cases, these descriptions are probably more laugh-generating than the discs and performers being discussed (or in some cases, dismantled).