

TINY MOORE

Western Swing's Great Mandolinist

By Michael Mendelson

PEOPLE LOVED TO hear Bob Wills holler; it was his trademark. But Bob didn't just holler for anybody. The leader of western swing's seminal Texas Playboys would only let go when the music was just right. When he called out: "The biggest little instrument in the world! Tiny Moore and his mandolin!" he must have raised a few eyebrows. A mandolin in a western swing band?

But there it was, played by Billie "Tiny" Moore—a native Texan, a Texas Playboy, later one of Merle Haggard's Strangers, and one of the finest western swing instrumentalists of all time. Tiny has been playing the fiddle and mandolin for 50 years, and he has become so highly respected by acoustic mandolin players that they often forget he plays virtually all his music on an electric mandolin. But whether playing with or without amplification, he has been a significant influence on a whole generation of string musicians.

"I was born in Hamilton County, Texas, on May 12, 1920," he relates. "I say 'county' because it was out on the farm; the name of the community is Energy, Texas. At one time it had two stores. Today it is back to one store, which is also the post office and the local gathering place. There's not even a school or a church there now. My mother taught piano. They tell me she used to put me in the buggy when I was a youngster, and go to people's houses and teach piano;



so I guess some of my musical background came from my mother's side of the family. On my dad's side of the family, some of them played a little bit; but my dad never played. Grandfather played fiddle, but I don't remember hearing him. I just remember hearing that he played."

Tiny had barely started school when his family moved to Port Arthur, on Texas's Gulf Coast. It was there that he had his first music lessons. "When I was six or seven years old we moved to Port Arthur," he recalls, "so most of my growing up was done there. Before I finished high school, my brother Dee Moore, who was ten years younger than I, had a bad case of asthma and couldn't live in the climate; so my dad got transferred to Dallas, and soon after we moved back to Energy. I had taken violin lessons in Port Arthur, formal violin lessons. And this was a time when, if you had a 'legitimate' violin teacher, you just did not play popular music of any kind. My mother would buy the popular songs of the day—'Highways Are Happy Days,' I can think of several old songs like that—and we'd play them at home. My teacher found out about it and really raised Cain; she really didn't like that at all. Now, after we moved back to Energy, I had a great uncle who played fiddle and a little guitar. He and I played together, along with my mother and a couple of cousins, at school parties and things like that. My first paying job was a typical country dance, where a family would take all the furniture out of a couple of rooms and invite the neighbors. My uncle and I played that and I made 75 cents. Boy, I was rich there for a day or two. So that's really the way I started in, playing fiddle and guitar."

Tiny's first performance experience with a band, aside from his high school orchestra in Hamilton County, was with a group of fellow high school students who called themselves the Clod Hoppers—not to be confused with the early Nashville string band by the same name. As a fiddler and guitarist, he played with the group for two years prior to his graduation from high school, in 1937.

"There was the rhythm guitar and a singer, bass fiddle, tenor banjo, and trumpet," he recalls. "We were kind of a swing band. We played at a lot of store openings and things around town. As I remember, it was not too bad a band."



Tiny left the group, and Hamilton County, after graduation. His father, unable to make the farm pay, had already moved back to Port Arthur. The rest of the family followed after the school year ended. Tiny went to work in a Port Arthur grocery store at \$8 a week. Soon, however, he met a young tenor banjo player named Woody Edmuston. Edmuston knew a still younger guitarist named Jimmy Wyble, who was later to play with Bob Wills and to become a well-known jazz artist in his own right [see *Frets'* sister magazine *Guitar Player*, June '77]; and the three began working together.

"Jimmy and Woody and myself played together in Port Arthur for a while, doing little things like clubs," Tiny says. "Back then we played popular music. We didn't necessarily play country songs. In those days I was not a fan of the *Grand Ole Opry*, I must say—of the old 'blood on the highway' songs. So we did whatever songs were popular at the time. We copied a lot of Benny Goodman things, especially from the Goodman sextet; so even then I was thinking swing."

Tiny acquired his nickname during the same period. "I got the nickname of 'Tiny' from Woody," he says. "At the time I graduated from high school, I was the biggest thing in the class. I weighed 267 pounds. I've had a weight problem all my life—still have it, but now it's under better control."

About 1940, Tiny began working in a trio with another jazz guitarist, Lloyd Ellis. "We played around Port Arthur a little bit—not too many jobs, but playing for enjoyment,"



he recalls. "I probably learned more then about jazz than I did in any one other period. We decided to try a band and take it to Mobile, Alabama. We had a steel player, a guitar player, a bass player, and myself. Back in those days, you got a radio program to publicize where you were going to be playing, and you played the radio for nothing. So we got our radio program, moved into this one-big-room apartment plus kitchen—all four of us—and proceeded to starve for about a month because there was no work to be had! We finally got a couple or three jobs, played the radio program and a couple of clubs. We worked in a hotel cocktail lounge for a month, I guess. It didn't go over too well. We just had to give up, and I went back to Port Arthur."

It wasn't long before Tiny—still primarily a fiddler—got his first taste of bandleading and recording. "I went to Louisiana with a Cajun band by the name of Happy Fats and his Rainbow Ramblers," he says. "We lived in Rayne, Louisiana, and our program was in Lafayette on KVOL. Not long after that I got in with a group in Port Arthur called the Jubileers [not the same as the Port Arthur Jubileers, who recorded for Decca]. The band was originally formed to advertise the Sears and Roebuck company.

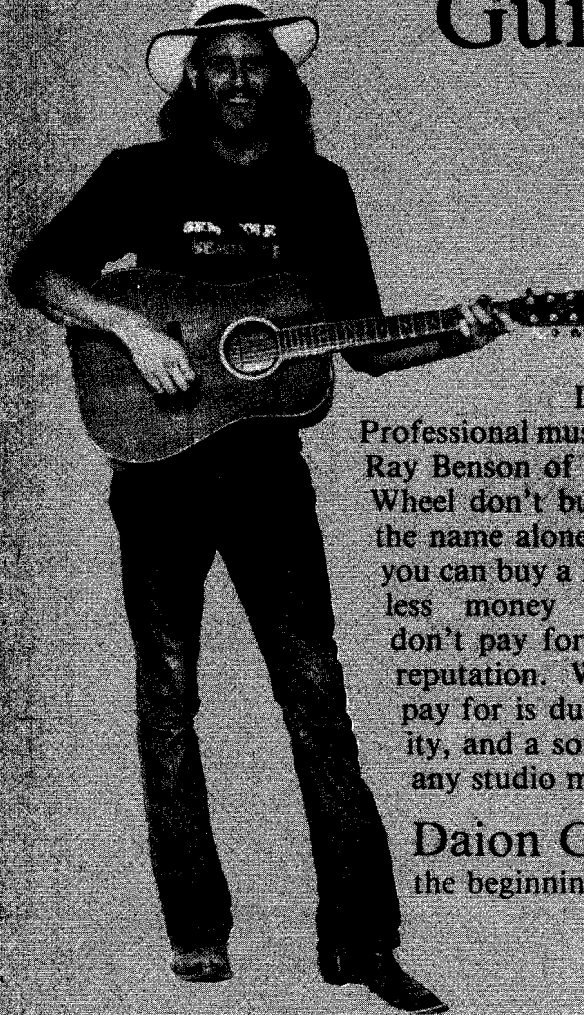
I finally took the band over, and we made some records on the Bluebird label. That was my first recording work. Then I got a chance to go with a band in Houston called the Crustene Ranch Gang [named for the sponsor, Crustene shortening]. They had a weekly radio show over the Texas Quality Network, plus a station in Little Rock. We'd go around and play store openings, celebrations, and dances. Gee, we made forty or fifty bucks a person at those dances. It was good for maybe a year or so. From that point the world war broke out. I got my 'greeting' [draft notice] in 1943 and went into the Air Force. I spent two years of that in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, as a radio operator and teacher."

The seeds of Tiny's mandolin career were sown just prior to his hitch in the service. "I had started playing mandolin right before I went into the Air Force, on an electric mandolin," he remembers. "It was a homemade instrument that a fellow made for me. I've still got it. There was a guy in Houston by the name of Leo Raley, who played the first electric mandolin I had ever heard. I heard him on the radio. Now, Leo didn't play any jazz; he played strictly lead. And there was a young fellow from around Port Arthur and Beaumont who played a swing-type thing, except I've forgotten his name. I had heard [guitarist] Charlie Christian on records, and I admired him very much. I listened to saxophone players and trumpet players. [Saxophonist] Coleman Hawkins was a favorite of mine. I also admired a steel guitar player named Bob Dunn. [Ed. Note: Dunn began his influential career in 1934, with Milton Brown and the Musical Brownies. See "Steel Guitar: The Western

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Swing Era, "Guitar Player, Dec. '79.] Dunn could make a steel guitar sound more like a tenor sax than anybody I ever heard, the way he used phrasing, so I tried a little bit to do that style. We were playing dance music, so we tried to play things that would swing and make people want to dance."

After mustering out of the service, Tiny went back to Port Arthur. During the war he had halved the number of strings on his mandolin, reacting—like many other musicians—to the string-shortage scare that grew out of wartime metal scarcities. "I liked the single-string setup better, after I got used to it," Tiny says, "and I never did go back. It was a little bit easier to finger, but mainly I liked the sound. It sounded more like an electric guitar, and I was trying to copy people like Charlie Christian and other early jazz guitarists."

He soon got a chance to display his developing style to bandleader Bob Wills. "One Sunday night in the summer of 1946, Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys were in town at the Port Arthur Pleasure Pier, a place out on the big lake there," Tiny says. "I had become acquainted with Junior Barnard, one of his guitar players, while working at the shipyards in Houston before I went into the service. I asked Junior if there was any chance of getting on the band, but he said he was sure Bob wouldn't be hiring anybody. So a drummer friend of mine, Richard Prine, and I were going to take a little trip up through Dallas, up to Oklahoma, and look for work—to see if we could find a band that needed a drummer and a fiddler/mandolin player. Right after the dance we decided to take off. We drove through Beaumont, which is 15 or 16 miles from Port Arthur, and we went past this little sandwich stand—we called them 'pig stands.' We decided we'd better go back and get us some coffee and a sandwich, because it was a long way to Houston. We drove back, and there were Bob Wills, Tommy Duncan, and Billy Jack Wills sitting in there eating. Richard had met Bob, so he went over and started talking with him.



Tiny, fiddling with the headlining group at the Split Rock Western Swing Festival, South Dakota, in 1979. From left: Joe Holley, Tiny, John Hanson, and Eldon Shamblin.

Bob called me over and asked if I had a mandolin there. We went out to the car and dug out the little amplifier and the mandolin, and I set it up on the counter there in this little restaurant. They plugged it in for me in the back, and I auditioned on the stool there in the diner. And after that I worked in the band with Bob for about four years."

Tiny, who was then using a Gibson electric mandolin, found the experience of playing with Wills an unforgettable one. "Bob Wills was a tremendous bandleader," he says. "For instance, a lot of times he might not start with us, and we never would really be sure if he was going to be there if he didn't start with us. So we would work our tails off, trying to make the band sound as good as possible so the people would not be too irate. But the minute he stepped on the bandstand, the band would sound entirely different, just from his leadership. He was just a natural leader, that's all.

"We worked out strictly 'head' arrangements [simple four or five bar riffs to set the melody]. Most of the swing-type arrangements that we did were done on our own. After I joined the band, Eldon Shamblin [guitar—see *Guitar Player*, April '75] and Herb Remington [steel guitar] usually worked them out. Then after Johnny Gimble [fiddle and mandolin] joined, he would be in on it, too. Eldon might start out, 'Let's try this for four bars,' or what-

ever, then maybe I'd come up with a lick. It was strictly a community-type thing.

"Now, two fiddles—this was something else. I think it helped my musical ability tremendously, working with Bob and with Joe Holley and Louis Tierney. Joe played one certain part—I think it was above the lead that Bob was playing—and Louis was playing the other part, below the lead. Well, those two would work for a while, then leave the band, work somewhere else and come back. As a result [to fill in], I learned both parts on the fiddle and learned how to do both kinds of harmony."

Tired of traveling, Tiny eventually decided to put down roots in Wills Point, California, near Sacramento. "In early 1950 I came out to Wills Point," he says. "I was still working for Bob, but now I was managing the Wills Point Ballroom. I felt we needed a local band to help us get some radio publicity, so after a few months I called Bob and asked if he would send out Billy Jack Wills, who at the time was married to my wife's sister, Evelyn [the McKinney sisters, Evelyn and Dean, worked for a number of years as vocalists in Bob's band]. About the middle of 1950 we got on radio KFBK in Sacramento. Our band was small—five or six pieces—but it was very successful locally."

While working with what became known as the Billy Jack Wills Band, Tiny began pondering the advantages of having an extra string on his mandolin. During an appearance in Los Angeles, he met innovative instrument builder Paul Bigsby and asked Bigsby if such an instrument were feasible. "I got to thinking that the extra string would give me a lot more mobility and a wider range," Tiny recalls, "Paul Bigsby said he'd be glad to give it a try, so I ordered it right there, that night. But I didn't get it for a year." The 5-string electric mandolin, with the same scale length as Tiny's Gibson electric mandolin but with a wider fretboard, arrived in 1952. Tiny has been playing it ever since. It is tuned C-G-D-A-E, bottom to top, incorporating on one instrument the ranges of both the mandolin and the mandola. Tiny says he uses standard Black Diamond mandolin strings, with a guitar sixth string for his C string. Currently, he changes strings about once a month, though when he had a heavier performance

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A 1946 photo of Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys. In front, from extreme left, are Millard Kelso, Wills, an unidentified fiddler, Tommy Duncan, the McKinney sisters, and Tiny Moore. In back are Ocie Stockard, Johnny Cuiello, Eldon Shamblin, Herb Remington, and Billy Jack Wills.

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schedule he changed them weekly. He uses a medium-gauge "Tiny Moore Music Center" flatpick.

Two years after switching to his 5-string, Tiny was briefly reunited with Bob Wills. "Bob came out here in the latter part of 1954," Tiny says, "and decided he was going to just work with us one night a week and take it easy. Well, Bob was not the type of person to do that. It had to be his band; it had to be his show. That was the makeup of the man. And he couldn't stay in one place very long. So after we tried this for only a month or two in early 1955 he decided he was going to go on the road again. I didn't want to go, so that's where we parted company."

After leaving Wills, Tiny continued entertaining on his own. He got a job on a local television station, and for the next five years he was known to the younger set in Sacramento as Ranger Roy, while working as a musician on the weekends. Around 1961 he lost his job at the station as the result of a strike. He then decided he needed a more stable economic base, so he opened the Tiny Moore Music Center (2331 El Camino, Sacramento, CA 95821). He has had it ever since, and he continues to teach guitar, fiddle, and mandolin. He also maintains a small retail outlet, his most unusual item being an electric 5-string mandolin custom built by Jay Roberts of Yuba City, California. The instrument is patterned after Tiny's original Bigsby.

In 1970, Merle Haggard gathered a number of the original Texas Playboys to record a tribute album to Bob Wills. That session brought together a number of musicians who had not seen each other for many years, and Tiny was one of them. The release of *A Tribute To The Best Damn Fiddle Player In The World (or, My Salute To Bob Wills)* (Capitol, ST 638), probably did more to revitalize western swing music than any other record of the decade. In 1973, another album was recorded, the last one on which Bob Wills was to appear. *For The Last Time* (United Artists, UA LA216-J2) was a fitting memorial to the father of western swing.

Through these recording sessions, Tiny and the other ex-Playboys were brought out of retirement. Tiny became a member of Merle Haggard's Strangers for a period of about three years from 1973 through 1976. He still works with Haggard whenever the band is in the Northern California area, playing with the Strangers and making arrangements for hiring local talent. Tiny has also "rediscovered" his old friend Eldon Shamblin, the man whom Tiny characterizes as "the best rhythm guitar player in the world, as far as I'm concerned." Even though Eldon lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the two veteran musicians make a point of getting together whenever they can.

With the growing popularity of fiddling and western swing, Tiny has been more and more in demand as a performer. An active member of the California Old Time Fiddlers Association, he is a frequent participant at contests. As part of the Blender Trio, with his wife Dean and guitarist Vern Baughman, Tiny appeared at the Western Regional Folk Festival near San Francisco in 1978. For the past two years he and Shamblin have taken part in South Dakota's annual Split Rock Swing Festival, put on by the South Dakota Friends of Old Time Music. They are scheduled to appear again this year.

The most recent highlight of Tiny's career came last year, when he was invited to record an album on the Kaleidoscope label with Jethro Burns [*Frets*, Oct. '79]. As if the two mandolin wizards (plus producer David Grisman [*Frets*, Mar. '79] sitting in on a couple of cuts) were not enough, the rhythm section was a jazz player's dream: Eldon Shamblin on guitar, Shelly Manne on drums, and Ray Brown on bass. The album was titled *Back To Back* (Kaleidoscope [Box 0, El Cerrito, CA 94530], F-9), and initial response (see "On Record," p. 58) has been so good that Kaleidoscope has plans for a solo Tiny Moore album later this year. Four decades after his first recording dates, Tiny Moore is still laying down some of the hottest mandolin tracks ever put on record. ■

For an in-depth look at Tiny Moore's style, see David Grisman's "Mandolin" column on page 78.



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