

"Smoke, Smoke, Smoke (That Cigarette)" and a series of Hollywood western movies set veteran artiste Tex Williams firmly on the pathway of fame. During a recent interview with CMP columnist Bob Powel, Tex gave insight into some of the highlights, and events, in a multi-faceted career.

THIRTY YEARS ON—AND TEX STILL SWINGS WITH WESTERN SOUNDS



TEX WILLIAMS must just about be the only Country singer who makes Bryan Chalker sound like a soprano. On the 23rd of this month Tex enters his sixtieth year, and yet he is still a very busy performer, and unlike many veterans his voice has lost none of its quality or richness. Although regarded as a West Coast artiste, he does not come from that part of the world, nor from Texas for that matter, in spite of his name. Tex hails from the rural part of the State that has Chicago as its largest city—Illinois—and he received his first truly professional experience at a radio station in nearby Decatur. However, it was not long before he made the long journey west, in the hope of getting into the singing field, and possessing a secret desire to make it into western movies. Something he achieved in spite of the obvious handicap of a slight limp, a result of polio when he was very young.

When you think of *western swing* (and more and more people are doing that these days), then the name of Bob Wills automatically springs to mind. After that must come Spade Cooley; the tragic person, who for many years was second only to Wills in the western swing stakes, but who ended his life in prison after he murdered his wife. Cooley died a few years ago, two months before he was due for release. In the early days one of the important features of the Cooley band was the bass baritone voice of Tex Williams. When Tex was over last year he appeared on my programme "London Country", and I asked him how he

came to meet Spade. "This was through another band several years before Spade organised his outfit. I was working with a group who were called The Rhythm Rangers and we came into Hollywood to do a picture with Tex Ritter, and at that time Spade was stand in for Roy Rogers. He also played fiddle with various bands around the Hollywood-Los Angeles area.

"I met him then, and in 1942 Spade started organising the big western swing band. A kid by the name of C. Hosneir and I were charter members, and we helped put the band together, and I did his vocals for about four years".

Tex Williams is in no doubt of the contribution played by his former band leader. "Spade really had a lot to do with widening the scope of Country Music". Tex's voice can be heard on the now rare Spade Cooley U.S. Columbia records, and they are some of the finest western swing music ever put down on a 78 disc.

In 1946 Tex departed the security of the Spade Cooley band to form his own group "The Western Caravan", and he was well aware of the risk he as taking "It had to be a gamble" he said, "but I already had the contract promised and offered by Capitol Records and, of course, with Spade being on Columbia it was just a must I had to make the break, and try it on my own".

In the days before albums and EPs, 78s were—of course—huge sellers, selling in much larger quantities than they do now, and the recording com-

panies came to expect large sales from their artistes. "My producer, Mr. Lee Gillette informed me that he was going to have to let me go from the label. My first record only sold 200,000 and the second only around 190,000. He said 'that's not enough, you are the only big band on the label' ". In those days records were cut with a three or four piece band or even with just a guitar, so a 14-piece band like Western Caravan made a much bigger dent in Capitol's recording budget than fellow Capitol artistes like Tex Ritter and Tennessee Ernie Ford.

Tex Williams takes up the story: "I went out scrounging for hit material. Of course at that time everything that Merle Travis was writing was successful, he was having hit after hit. I asked Merle if he had something. He said 'I have something partially finished, you wouldn't like it, it's probably no good'. It turned out to be 'Smoke, Smoke, Smoke (That Cigarette)'. I finished part of it, and put the melody, such as it is, behind it". The fast moving monologue sold well over a million records, and topped the American pop charts in late 1947.

The Western Caravan lasted for around a dozen years until 1956, but as Tex pointed out to me, the whole idea of a large group was made redundant with the increase of electrical amplification. With amps and speakers you didn't need 14 pieces to reach the far corner of a dance hall. *Anyway tastes were changing.* I asked Tex if the demise of the Western Caravan was a sudden thing. "Actually it came gradually, times were changing and we started cutting down. It didn't warrant 14 pieces, we'd go to 10, then nine, then to seven, and pretty soon we had a five piece group".

During the life of the Western Caravan Tex appeared in a number of films, including 24 of his own for the huge film company Universal International. He starred in three complete series of eight episodes each in the years 1949, 1950 and 1951. "They were small budget westerns, and I enjoyed it for this reason. I never thought I would have the chance to star in pictures. It was a great experience, and it was the hardest work I've ever done. You would go out there on the set, usually on location when the sun isn't up yet, and they'd hit you in the face with that cold sponge for make-up, and you were there sometimes until ten o'clock at night on a long day. It is tough work".

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Tex Williams

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Chart-wise, Tex Williams went through a quiet patch after "Smoke, Smoke, Smoke" in 1947. The following year he had a minor pop and Country hit with "Life Gets Tee-jus, Don't It". But the major honours for this comedy narration went to the tune's composer, the legendary old-timer Carson J. Robison. In 1949 Tex scored with "There's A Bluebird On Your Window-sill", then for 16 long years Tex Williams was totally missing from the Billboard Country Charts.

Like all Country singers in the middle and late fifties, Tex suffered badly from the rock and roll era. At one time, on the Decca label, he even went rockabilly himself, but to no avail. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he took a very long time to be re-established as a chart artiste, with stints at Liberty, in addition to Decca, providing no real chart success. This is not to say that in this lean period Tex was inactive. On the contrary, he toured all over the world working civilian and servicemen's clubs and theatres, but his career was in dire need of a boost. It came from a surprising quarter.

During the mid-sixties the small labels did not enjoy the power they have today, and when Tex Williams signed for the tiny Boone label, no one in the music business thought that any

real success would follow. The experts were proved wrong though. Thanks to the modern production of singer/song-writer Ray Pennington, the South/Lee composition "Too Many Tigers" broke the duck with a minor run in 1965. In the same year Kenny Price's composition "Big Tennessee" also reached the lower reaches of the charts. It bore more than a passing resemblance to Jimmy Dean's "Big Bad John", and Jimmy was among those who noticed, but he took no action. "Bottom Of A Mountain", in 1966, became Tex's first top 20 hit since 1949.

Tex continued with a succession of minor hits on Boone until 1968 (one of the last was "Smoke, Smoke, Smoke '68"). In 1970, after Boone had folded, he followed his producer Ray Pennington to Monument Records, and re-entered the charts with a song called "It Ain't No Big Thing", and it wasn't. But the follow-up did much better. This was an early Dick Feller novelty song with a long-winded title "The Night Miss Nancy Ann's Hotel For Single Girls Burned Down", and it did much to re-activate Tex's career. Tex only had a couple of small successes on Monument and, in 1972, left the label. He signed to the West Coast label Granite, which is owned by Britain's own ATV Corporation, but run by the legendary West Coast producer Cliffie Stone, who has excelled in almost every facet of the music business. The partnership resulted in

one chart single, which was also the title of the album which was out over here on Pye "The Hazy, Lazy Days Of Summer" (Pye International NSPL 28201).

What of the future? Well, as you probably saw in July's CMP, Tex has an album out on a new West Coast label Corral Records, and I asked him if he could foresee when he would take to the road again with a full western swing sound. "It's already starting to happen in the States", he replied. "Leon McAuliff, I had a call from him a few months ago, asked if I could get part of the original band together. Of course a lot of the original Western Caravan are gone, but people like W. Murphy on the steel guitar, Pedro DePaul on the accordion, are still around. Leon said the colleges are crying out for the original sound of the Texas Playboys and Leon's band The Cimarron Boys, and the Western Caravan, and you can name your own price". The interview took place over a year ago, and to the best of my knowledge this has yet to happen, but with the popularity of Western Swing constantly on the increase it's surely only a matter of time.

So there is plenty of life left in Tex Williams, a unique talent, and one whose best times could be yet to come, at an age when most people in the entertainment business are totally forgotten.

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