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Book Review: The Roots of Texas Music

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The Roots of Texas Music is a collection of nine essays focusing on Texan contributions to such American musical traditions as jazz, country, blues, classical, Gospel, “Chicano,” polka, and zydeco. Gary Hartman’s introductory overview of Texas music history is the longest and among the best of the collection’s chapters. His coverage of Native American music (including the only specific reference to the Great Plains), French music, and a brief mention of rock and roll presents three musical styles not included in any of the more in-depth studies that follow.

Dave Oliphant’s chapter on jazz is a concise survey of the contributions Texans have made to jazz history and also provides new information since the publication of his Texan Jazz (1996). Joe W. Specht’s essay on country music traditions is well researched and a fresh approach to the topic. Two chapters providing an often neglected perspective on Texas music are Larry Wolz’s “Roots of Classical Music in Texas: The German Contribution” (Wolz is the only music historian among the contributors) and Kenneth Davis’s “Make a Joyful Noise: Some Popular Religious Music in Twentieth-Century Texas.” The book concludes with one of the strongest chapters, Roger Wood’s “Black Creoles and the Evolution of Zydeco in Southeast Texas.”

John Lightfoot’s “Early Texas Bluesman” is among the weaker essays. Regrettably, Lightfoot relies heavily on liner notes and ignores (or is not aware of) Alan Govenar’s important Meeting the Blues (1995) and (with Jay F. Brakefield) Deep Ellum and Central Track: Where the Black and White Worlds of Dallas Converged (1998). Carolyn F. Griffith’s chapter on Czech and Polish music fails to mention Adolph Hofner, the “King of South Texas Swing.” Nor does Griffith appear to be aware that Arhoolie Records has issued a recording of Baca’s Original Band (Arhoolie CD 7026).

José Angel Gutiérrez’s “Chicano Music: Evolution and Politics to 1950” is the weakest essay of the collection and arguably a disservice to the history of música tejana. Gutiérrez’s glaring political agenda could indeed be a springboard for debate, but for what was intended as a survey of the history of Texas-Mexican music, his essay falls short.

Lawrence Clayton’s initial objective for The Roots of Texas Music was to “bring a fresh look to the subject of Texas music,” writes Joe W. Specht, who became co-editor of the collection shortly before Clayton’s death in December, 2000. Despite the shortcomings listed above, the better essays do indeed fulfill Clayton’s objective.

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