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Review of *The Women There Don't Treat You Mean: Abilene in Song* By Joe W. Specht

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The Women There Don't Treat You Mean: Abilene in Song. By Joe W. Specht. Abilene, TX: State House Press, 2006. 112 pp. Illustrations, notes, song lyrics, index, compact disc. \$14.95.

What's in a name? If that name is "Abilene" and it rhymes easily with other poetic phrases and occupies a mystic landscape in the popular imagination, then there's quite a bit. That is the basic message of this modest but surprisingly complex essay in cultural geography that traces the presence of Abilene, Texas, in some sixty popular songs over the past century. Author Joe Specht, librarian and music historian at McMurry University in Abilene, has collected music and files on this subject for many years and finally brought it all together with recent interviews with many of the songwriters themselves. The result is a work easily read in a single sitting, packaged in a hardbound, CD-sized booklet with an accompanying CD of six of the songs. A series of short chapters begins with the George Hamilton IV hit of 1963 (from which the title comes) and includes bluesman Lightnin' Hopkins, country singers Ernest Tubb, Johnny Cash, and Waylon Jennings, songs of arriving and songs of leaving, and local talent. Specht also traces the Abilene mystique to Chicago, Durham, Vancouver, and even across the Atlantic to the UK and Germany. The text is enhanced by copious notes rich in discography, personal information, and music Web sites.

We find that Abilene—real, imagined, or just its name—appeals to many different interests. To the locals it is home, with specific landscapes and social memories. To other Texans, such as “Home with the Armadillo” composer Gary P. Nunn, it is the quintessential Texas of open country and good-hearted people evoked with nostalgia from a cold London hotel room. For still others, Abilene occupies a cultural frontier, as songwriter and geoscientist Lesli J. Wood observes: “I have always felt that Abilene was a markstone that separated the civilized, Southern Baptist Texas from the great, unwashed western U.S. The town sort of marks the beginning of the new western frontier in my mind.”

Many of these songwriters have never been to Abilene and have only the vaguest notion of what it is like or even where in Texas it lies. In some instances it is unclear whether a song refers to the Abilene on the southern rim of the Texas Plains or the fabled cowtown in Kansas. What is clear is that Abilene appeals to many songwriters as a good name with a Texas connection that is vague and therefore full of poetic promise.

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