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Review of *Jazz of the Southwest: An Oral History of Western Swing* By Jean A. Boyd

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Jazz of the Southwest: An Oral History of Western Swing. By Jean A. Boyd. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998. Illustrations, notes, works cited, index. x + 269 pp. \$37.50 cloth, \$17.95 paper.

In her preface to *Jazz of the Southwest*, Jean Boyd explains that she was only introduced to western swing in 1990. A musicologist at Baylor University's School of Music, Boyd is well-schooled in music theory, as evidenced by her frequent lapses into musicological jargon. But she is painfully unschooled not only in western swing's history, but the record industry in general during the period in which the genre thrived. Boyd's assumption that western swing is an offshoot of jazz is simplistic, yet she spends the entire book trying to prove this point rather than coming to a conclusion based on the results of her interviews. Western swing is first and foremost a product

of country music. Although its musicians studied jazz recordings and performance, and idolized jazz artists such as Joe Venuti and Louis Armstrong, they catered specifically to country audiences and promoted themselves as “fiddle bands” (as they were originally called), not as jazz bands.

Billed as an oral history, the book is instead ninety percent commentary and ten percent oral history. No pains have been taken to verify informants’ statements, which are sometimes inaccurate. The direct quotes used are often uninteresting and poorly edited.

The book is organized into chapters focusing on practitioners of individual instruments (such as guitar, fiddle, steel guitar). Each informant is dealt with separately, set off by a biography, a format that soon becomes wearisome and repetitive, especially with regard to Bob Wills, for whom many of Boyd’s informants played.

Boyd’s unfamiliarity with previously published western swing scholarship (including Tony Russell’s pioneering interviews in *Old Time Music*, Kevin Coffey and Rich Kienzle’s equally substantial work for the *Journal of Country Music* and album annotations, and this reviewer’s biography of western swing founder Milton Brown) is evident throughout her book. Numerous errors, moreover, are left uncorrected by her editor. A few examples include Boyd saying that Bob Wills first recorded on the Brunswick label (it was Vocalion, owned by ARC/Brunswick), misspellings of names such as Joaquin Murphey, Bert Dodson, Artie Glenn, and Dick McDonough, and stating that the Modern Mountaineers recorded for the Okeh label of RCA Victor (they were not affiliated).

Although the subject deserves attention, the book’s misstatements and sloppy research make it more a disservice to the study of this genre than a valuable resource.

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