

# “New San Antonio Rose”--Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys (1940)

Added to the National Registry: 2003

Essay by Kevin Coffey (guest post)\*



*Original label*

In November 1969, while orbiting the moon, Apollo 12 astronaut Pete Conrad played the classic “San Antonio Rose,” he claimed it was for his fellow astronaut, Fort Worth, Texas, native Alan Bean, to keep Bean from feeling too homesick. The song was actually more for Conrad’s own benefit--apparently Bean wasn’t interested or moved--but the incident nevertheless underscores the song’s status and enduring appeal.

“San Antonio Rose”--or “New San Antonio Rose” to give the definitive 1940 version with lyrics its proper title--was three decades old when Conrad played it from outer space, but it had long since become a standard, not only in western music circles but also as a popular song as well. Its composition is credited to the legendary western swing bandleader and fiddler Bob Wills, who recorded it first as, an instrumental, in 1938, then again with added lyrics in 1940. While the song’s provenance is more complicated than that, there is no question that it is an enduring American classic.

Texan James Robert “Bob” Wills (1905-1975) came from a family of fiddlers and began playing fiddle at age ten. He had first risen to prominence with Fort Worth’s Light Crust Doughboys, which he formed with vocalist Milton Brown in the winter of 1930-31. By 1934, he was in Tulsa, a fast rising regional star, leading his own Texas Playboys, playing a fascinating dance music hybrid of hillbilly, cowboy, jazz, blues, Latin and pop that he and Milton Brown pioneered and which would eventually be tagged Western Swing. In 1935, Wills began recording for the Brunswick/American Record Company budget label Vocalion. At his first session he cut an instrumental he called “Spanish Two-Step.” Although the song bore his composer’s credit, he’d learned it from local musicians while working as a barber in Roy, New Mexico, in 1927. The lively dance tune featured Wills’ fiddle and the electric steel guitar of 18 year-old Leon McAuliffe, who played a second melodic strain on the song’s bridge. It became a huge seller for Wills, the first of several dozen hits.

When Wills and his Playboys travelled to Dallas to record in November 1938, his record producer Art Satherley asked him to “give me another ‘Spanish Two-Step.’” Wills responded with “San Antonio Rose,” which Satherley named. While this account seems to imply that Wills came up with the song on the spot, it’s likelier that Satherley’s request was made ahead of the recording session. At any rate, as Wills and other Playboys explained it, they simply decided to play “Spanish Two-Step” “backwards.” That is, while on “Spanish Two-Step,” Wills had played the primary melody in the key of A and McAuliffe played the bridge in D, for “San Antonio Rose,” they flip-flopped and Wills started in D, with McAuliffe playing his bridge in A. The result was almost magical--Wills’ slurred Texas fiddle off-set by McAuliffe’s hot but haunting bridge. The song became an even bigger hit than its inspiration had been, and even pop bandleaders like the jazz violinist Joe Venuti began getting requests for the tune. Venuti and others urged Wills to do something more with the tune and he decided to add lyrics.

Here things get complicated. The accepted version of events, detailed by Wills’ biographer Charles Townsend, is that Wills and several band members attempted to write lyrics but that the final draft was mostly written by Wills’ trumpeter and announcer Everett Stover. Stover was a capable lyricist, but at least since the early ‘40s, there has been a counter claim that the original lyric was written by a San Antonio-based musician named Bob Symons, who recorded for the same label as Wills but with a local act named the Nite Owls. As early as 1943, a newspaper blurb named Symons as the song’s author and Symons’ widow maintained to her death in the 1990s that her husband (who died in 1976) had written at least the lyrics and sold them to Wills for \$30. The Symons family has kept a copy of what they say are the original lyrics, close-to-final version that Wills recorded but with intriguing differences. While disputes over the authorship of famous songs are common, there is a reasonably strong case for the accepted version of the song’s evolution and it remains possible that Symons had some hand in the song’s development.

Perhaps the most fascinating thing about the updated version of the song that Wills recorded in Fort Worth in April 1940 is its stylistic transformation. By this time Wills had built a versatile orchestra that was half modern western band and half pop big band, with reed and brass sections, and he chose to present “San Antonio Rose” in an entirely new setting. Gone were Wills’ own fiddle and McAuliffe’s steel guitar, replaced by a horn arrangement written by Wills’ guitarist Eldon Shamblin. It was big band swing with a decidedly romantic, mariachi flavor. The lyric was sung memorably by Wills’ long-time right-hand Tommy Duncan. Released a few months later, as “New San Antonio Rose,” the record was a smash, prompting several covers, by far the most important of which would be by America’s biggest singing star Bing Crosby. Crosby’s cover of “Rose” came only after a bizarre back-and-forth with publisher Irving Berlin. Berlin’s company had pursued the rights to publish the song but in a rather backhanded refusal to take seriously the success the song was having--presumably because it was a “hillbilly” song and not one written by an established Tin Pan Alley tunesmith--decided that it needed to be entirely rewritten and had a staff writer do so. The firm then published the sheet music to their rewrite and encouraged Wills to play the new “improved” version, but the song fell on deaf and angry ears and eventually Berlin was made to see the light of day, going back to the original version, printing the sheet music as “New San Antonio Rose,” thus differentiating it from their rewrite and also matching the title of Wills’ hit recording.

The song had brought Wills national attention that was only amplified by Crosby's version, by Wills' higher profile due to movie appearances and by a move by Wills to the West Coast in 1943. Not only did it remain the centerpiece of Wills' repertoire--a song he liked to joke "took us off the hamburgers and put us on the steaks"--but it entered into the repertoire of countless performers across the country, from local singers to national stars, from country to pop, even blues and rock 'n' roll artists. It remains, eight decades at this writing from its original recording, an all-time American classic, widely loved and still widely sung.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.