

A Layman's Primer on the Songs of Texas

By Tim Wilton

Nearly two years ago, *MYTH* visited the fascinating back story of one of the Texas' most treasured songs, *The Yellow Rose of Texas* (see *MYTH* issue no.). Since then, a reader or two have requested the back stories of other songs that are unique to Texas. And the list was a bit lengthy, from *Miles and Miles of Texas* and *Galveston* to *All My Exes Live in Texas* and *San Antonio Rose*. But a few requests stood out above the others, and their stories deserve a quick read...

Deep in the Heart of Texas

To better understand how this song has arguably become Texas' calling card to not just the other forty-nine states but also to most of the western world, one needs to look no further than the hilariously campy 1985 film, *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*. There is a memorable scene where the title character, despondent after having been tricked into traveling to Texas to retrieve his beloved bicycle (he was told that it was sitting in the basement of the Alamo. Note: there is no basement in the Alamo!) and wanting to get back home, is at a bus station payphone and confronted with the task of proving to the skeptical friend on the other end of the line that he actually is in Texas.

Suddenly inspired, Pee-wee leans out of the booth and begins singing the first verse to anyone that can hear: "*The stars at night are big and bright...*" Of course, everyone within earshot instinctively claps four times then replies in unison, "...*deep in the heart of Texas.*"

Granted, for some people this is a silly scene in a silly movie full of silly scenes, but it does illustrate the important role a song can play in spreading Texas' singular, almost-too-good-to-be-true-that-it-must-be-a-myth identity to the rest of the world. Odds are, the movie scene described above could probably take place anywhere in the world—in *real life!*

Written in 1941 by lyricist June Hershey, with music by Don Swander, *Deep in the Heart of Texas* was first recorded by Perry Como with Ted Weems and His Orchestra, for Decca Records in Los Angeles, only two days after Pearl Harbor was attacked. It went on to spend five weeks at the top the music chart in 1942, and also became the title of a western movie that same year that featured Tex Ritter and the Jimmy Wakely Trio performing the song. In 1949, Bing Crosby's version reached number three and since then, other famous artists have gone on to record it, including Ray Charles, George Strait, Hank Thompson, Gene Autry, Nickel Creek and others.

Since most people only know the first refrain and chorus, here are the lyrics:

The stars at night are big and bright
(clap, clap, clap, clap),
Deep in the heart of Texas.
The prairie sky is wide and high
(clap, clap, clap, clap),
Deep in the heart of Texas.
The sage in bloom is like perfume
(clap, clap, clap, clap),
Deep in the heart of Texas.
Reminds me of the one I love
(clap, clap, clap, clap),
Deep in the heart of Texas.
The coyotes wail along the trail
(clap, clap, clap, clap),
Deep in the heart of Texas.
The rabbits rush around the brush
(clap, clap, clap, clap),
Deep in the heart of Texas.
The cowboys cry, "Ki-yip-pee-yi"
(clap, clap, clap, clap),
Deep in the heart of Texas.
The doggies bawl and bawl and bawl
(clap, clap, clap, clap),
Deep in the heart of Texas.

The Eyes of Texas

The alma mater of both the University of Texas at Austin and the University of Texas at El Paso, *The Eyes of Texas* was written by John Sinclair in 1903. According to the Handbook of Texas, the song was written for a popular minstrel troupe that toured Texas at the time, The Cowboy Minstrel Show. Written in only a few hours and to the tune of *I've Been Working on*

the Railroad, Sinclair was inspired by a saying made famous by the president of UT at the time, William “Colonel” Prather. An alum of Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia, where native son Robert E. Lee would often remind students “the eyes of the South are upon you,” Prather often ended his speeches at student assemblies with a similar “the eyes of Texas are upon you.”

The original manuscript of the lyrics hangs in the Alumni Center at UT, and since most people only know the middle section (in bold), here are the complete lyrics :

I once did know a President,
Away down South, in Texas.
And, always, everywhere he went,
He saw the eyes of Texas.

The Eyes of Texas are upon you,
All the live long day.
The Eyes of Texas are upon you,
You can not get away.
Do not think you can escape them
At night or early in the morn-
The Eyes of Texas are upon you
‘Till Gabriel blows his horn.

Sing me a song of Prexy,
Of days long since gone by.
Again I seem to great him
And hear his kind reply.
Smiles of gracious welcome
Before my memory rise,
Again I hear him say to me,
“Remember Texas’ Eyes.”

Intended as a joke, Sinclair would sing the song on stage in blackface, satirizing the serious monotone delivery that Prather was known for in his speeches. However, when Prather passed away, the song was sung at his funeral as a solemn tribute. It was only then that the song was seriously accepted and soon afterward became the university’s alma mater. Traditionally played after UT sporting events and other important occasions, *The Eyes of Texas* was once a serious contender for official state song, and still garners support every few years to replace the official state song of Texas, the lesser known *Texas, Our Texas*.

Texas, Our Texas

In 1929 after a statewide competition, the state's 41st Legislature resolved that *Texas, Our Texas*, composed by William J. Marsh and Gladys Yoakum Wright in 1924, be adopted as the official song of Texas. Marsh was originally from Liverpool, England and like Wright, resided in Fort Worth. The state legislature had considered adopting a more well-known song, like *The Yellow Rose of Texas*, *Dixie*, or *The Eyes of Texas*, but Marsh's and Wright's composition finally won out due to its originality and relative newness. For readers who are not familiar with our state's official song (and apparently there are many), the lyrics are:

Texas, our Texas! All hail the mighty state!
Texas, our Texas! So wonderful, so great!
Boldest and grandest, withstanding every test;
O empire wide and glorious, you stand supremely blest.

CHORUS

God bless you, Texas! And keep you brave and strong.
That you may grow in power and worth, throughout the ages long.

Texas, O Texas! Your freeborn single star.
Sends out its radiance to nations near and far.
Emblem of freedom! It sets our hearts aglow.
With thoughts of San Jacinto and glorious Alamo.

Texas, dear Texas! From tyrant grip now free,
Shines forth in splendor your star of destiny!
Mother of heroes! We come your children true.
Proclaiming our allegiance, our faith, our love for you.

An interesting thing happened in 1959 after Alaska gained statehood and officially displaced Texas as our country's largest state: the original first word of the third line, *largest*, was replaced with *boldest*. And after spending decades as the "adopted" song of Texas, the 73rd Legislature finally made *Texas, Our Texas* the official state song in a 1993 law.

For more information on these and other iconic songs of Texas, be sure to pick up a copy of *The Handbook of Texas*, the comprehensive encyclopedia of Texas geography, history, and historical persons published jointly by the Texas State Historical Association (TSHA) and the General Libraries at The University of Texas at Austin. Another very useful resource is the

fascinating website administered by the Texas Music Office: www.EnjoyTexasMusic.com. The Texas Music Office is a state-funded business promotion and information clearinghouse for the state's ever growing music industry.