

BY TERRY EVANS

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Louise Rowe, right, brought in former Light Crust Doughboy fiddler Jim Baker.

Louise Rowe can still swing with the best of 'em, Western style.

“I just kind of dance with it while I’m playing,” said Rowe, 82, who struts a stand-up bass with her band, the Texan Playboys.

Six decades have passed since she was schooled by the legendary Bob Wills in the art of Western swing — as the only woman to ever play an instrument in his band, the Texas Playboys.

She and the Texan Playboys play weekly at the Texan Kitchen in Euless, where she now lives.

Among her band members is Jim Baker, a fiddler with the Light Crust Doughboys, the band that Wills helped start in the early 1930s and which still exists today.

“It’s great working with her, a big thrill for me because there’s lots of history behind her,” Baker said. “Western swing is my favorite thing.”

It’s also Richard Rash’s favorite thing, which is why the 73-year-old Euless resident and fan has been at the restaurant virtually every Friday night for about two years.

“I’ve been in Texas for 40 years and I identify with Texas music,” Rash said. “This band is as close to the original Western swing as you’re going to find.”

Songs like Faded Love, Home in San Antone and Cherokee Maiden bring in a crowd of people like Rash who understand that this is the music of Texas. To do those songs justice takes a particular kind of musician, and Rowe remembers how she became one.

Getting an early start

A Midland native who grew up in Duncan, Okla., Rowe was 5 years old in 1937 when she played her first gig with her siblings in the Seven Rowe Brothers band at a school Geronimo, Okla., just outside of Lawton.

“I remember my brother who played bass would put me on a chair when he played a fiddle hoedown,” Rowe said. “I would play the bass on two strings. I could make the right changes then by ear.”

The band’s increasing popularity drew them to Texas, and their little sister was with them in Wichita Falls when the big break came.

“Al Dexter heard the band, I think it was 1948 or ’49,” Rowe said. “He had a club in Dallas called the Bridgeport Club, and he hired the Seven Rowe Brothers as the house band.”

Rowe said her brothers became the first big Western swing band in North Texas and sometimes shared their stage with her, bringing her up to use her talented voice for an occasional song. But they also made sure she developed as a musician, teaching her guitar and fiddle, along with the bass.

“My first job was with the Big D Jamboree,” Rowe said. “I would sing there one week, and the next week I alternated with the Cowtown Jamboree. From there I went to work with Jim Boyd ... and doing a TV show on WFAA. That was in 1952.”

Her big break came when Dexter arranged a battle of the bands between her brothers and the Texas Playboys. Wills heard her sing one song, and that’s all she wrote.

“He hired me right there on the Al’s Barn bandstand,” Rowe said.

A real Texas Playboy

Of course, she said, Wills asked for and got the brothers’ blessing first. With that, he signed Rowe as a vocalist for an 18-date tour, mostly in California.

“On the way back to Texas, we were in Muskogee, Okla.,” Rowe said. “It was the 17th night of the tour and the rhythm guitarist, Eldon Shamblin, [Rolling Stone once said he was the greatest living guitarist in the world], could not make the gig that night.”

Despite that, the stage crew “hooked up Eldon’s guitar and set it in a chair in case someone decided to play some rhythm,” Rowe said. “I walked over and picked up the guitar and started beating rhythm. Bob Wills looked at me and said, “Child, I didn’t know you could do that.”

Rowe said that Wills most often called her “Child” when he spoke to her, unless she had messed up.

“If Bob called me Louise, he was mad at me for something,” Rowe said. “He’d say, ‘Louise, I’m going to send you home to your brothers.’”



By itself, playing rhythm guitar that night didn’t change her standing as a singer with four solos per show. Wills was again impressed when Rowe relieved bass man Jack Loyd so Loyd could step up to the mike for a vocal solo. But something else that happened that night — also related to Shamblin’s absence — sealed the girl’s future.

“Eldon had been singing a third-part harmony to Faded Love,” Rowe said. “But Billy Bowman sang that part on the original recording, which was a hit, and he had a high tenor voice. Eldon was a baritone.”

When someone in the crowd requested Faded Love, Wills was at a loss without someone to sing Shamblin’s part.

Rowe said she volunteered, and Wills accepted with reservation.

“So when I sang the song, my voice was high, like Billy’s on the record, and it knocked Bob out,” Rowe said.

At the band's next and final performance of the tour in Dallas, Wills announced to the crowd that the band was going back on tour in California, would be doing TV and radio shows, and that Rowe was an official member of the band.

"He hadn't said a word to me before that," Rowe said.

During that second tour, Loyd met a girl, fell in love, got married and quit the band. Wills put the bass in Rowe's hands, got her a union card and dressed her in a costume to match the rest of the musicians.

"He told me, 'Now you are going to be a real Bob Wills Texas Playboy, and don't ever forget it,'" Rowe said.

The ensuing years brought countless musical accolades, tours and recordings with dozens of hall-of-fame-level performers.

Still playing bass fiddle

Rowe's other accomplishments include two marriages and two daughters, one of whom she lives with in a cul-de-sac home near the restaurant where she performs with the band she assembled a little over two years ago.



Louise Rowe plays stand-up bass with a band that includes her nephew, fiddler Dexter Rowe, at Texan Restaurant in Euless on April 24.

She was determined to achieve a genuine, mid-20th-century Western swing sound, and getting Baker on fiddle was only the beginning.

Take her choice for rhythm guitar: L.J. Pritchett.

"I wanted to build a band with an authentic Western swing rhythm section, and [Pritchett] worshipped Eldon Shamblin," Rowe said.

She rounded out the band with Jon Stutler, on sax, clarinet and vocals; her nephew, Dexter Rowe, on fiddle; Wayne Glassen and John Case, alternating on keyboard; and Mark Minton and former Texas Playboy Casey Dickens, on drums.

The one thing Rowe sacrificed to age was her singing voice. But she hasn't lost a lick with the big partner that got her signed on with Wills and frequently took her far away from North Texas.

“When I left here I was 19,” Rowe said. “Now, I’m back home again, dancing with my bass fiddle.”

IF YOU GO

Western swing veteran bassist Louise Rowe leads a group of musical historians called the Texan Playboys from 7 to 9 p.m. each Friday at Texan Kitchen, 415 N. Main St. in Euless.