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## PERSPECTIVES

(an article that many of our readers, especially those interested in Country-Western music will enjoy)

### Ramona Reed: A New Sound

— by Stoney Hardcastle

The Ranchouse in Dallas was jammed that November, Saturday night, 1950, when Bob Wills, King of Western Swing gave one of his famous front and center stage calls "Ramona." To the microphone stepped a pretty little cowgirl, Ramona Reed, from Oklahoma's Kiamichi Country. Music history was made. Wills had added a fulltime female vocalist to his group and yodeling became an instrument in the famous Texas Playboy sound.

Until Ramona joined Wills, yodeling in the United States was used by singers only as a bridge and break in lonesome blues songs, Jimmy Rogers style. No one dreamed that the Swiss warble would be blended into a Country-Western swing beat. Yet, through Wills' creativity and patience and a lot of hard work by Ramona, her golden voice became both a lead and harmony instrument in the distinctive Texas Playboy sound.

"Joining the Texas Playboys was my pot of gold at the end of the rainbow," says Ramona. "From as far back as I can remember, my life's goal was to sing with a big-name Country-Western band."

Raised on a ranch near Talihina, Oklahoma, before she even started to school Ramona began singing, yodeling, and pretending she was on the radio show.

Recognizing her young daughter's talent, Ramona's mother started driving her to a Saturday morning, amateur radio show, KTMC, McAlester, Oklahoma. Dud Stallins, station manager at the time, remembers Ramona as "the cutest, singinest, yodelingest thing I ever saw. Oh she was great."

Ramona says, "Oh those old radio shows were the greatest. Just to get to stand and sing into a mike was a dream."

After graduating from high school, Ramona enrolled in the fashionable Colorado Women's College in Denver. Even though it was completely out of character with the school's curriculum, she continued Country-Western singing and yodeling and once received two demerits for yodeling in the bathtub.

"Four demerits would have gotten me kicked out of school," Ramona laughs. "Then to my surprise I was asked to sing at the next assembly. That is when I discovered that regardless of social level almost everyone loves Country-Western music."



While in college Ramona may have the distinction of being the only singer to yodel in the Denver Metro Opera House. This was by invitation.

After one year of college, the singing little cowgirl went to Nashville, asked for and was given an audition by Jack Stapp, program director for WSM. She was hired on the spot and put on the "Noon Neighbors" show with Roy Acuff and his Smokey Mountain Boys. She was also given a spot on the Grand Ole Opry.

"Jack Stapp is one of the finest people I ever met," Ramona says. "He urged me to wait until I finished my education before I turned fulltime professional. And am I glad I took his advice and went back to school."

After college it was back to Nashville

for Ramona. On Stapp's recommendation she was hired as the first "Martha White Flour Girl" by the Martha White Flour Company.

As the Martha White Flour Girl she appeared weekly on the Grand Ole Opry and did three daily radio shows. With all the exposure and her picture on every bag of flour, the Martha White Flour Girl soon became the toast of the South.

Ramona still has stacks of fan mail she received, and included were several marriage proposals. "There was only one thing wrong with all the popularity," she remembers. "No one knew my real name. I was just Martha White. Dang, it was frustrating."

After almost a year in Nashville, Ramona says she came face to face with the

other side of the entertainment world. It seemed one of the female members of the popular and powerful Carter family needed a job and Ramona was pushed out.

"I don't care to discuss the incident in detail," Ramona says. "I just was shocked and felt helpless, bitter and frustrated. I just couldn't believe people operated in that manner."

A tough little trooper, Ramona didn't stay down long from her Nashville disappointment. In a few weeks she was auditioning in Dallas for Bob Wills.

"Believe me, I never sang as long and hard in my life as I did in the audition," she says. "The audition was in the afternoon at Bob's new Ranchouse Nightclub. He took a chair in the middle of the huge dance floor in front of the bandstand."

"With his band backing me, I sang. He smoked a cigar and listened. Didn't say a word. And that band, they were the best. Never asked what key. Just picked it up. For two hours I sang. I began to think it was an endurance contest. I had on a new pair of high heels. My feet and legs started aching. Finally I thought to heck with it and kicked off my shoes. I only sang two more songs after I kicked off my shoes and at last Bob stopped the audition. I figured that was the end. Bob came backstage and all he said was, 'I always wanted a female singer that would kick her shoes off'."

"That had to be the biggest thrill of my life," Ramona says. "Getting pushed out of Nashville turned into my biggest break. I was Ramona Reed, myself, singing with one of the country's most famous bands, not just a picture on a flour sack."

She laughs. "But I almost got fired as soon as I got hired. I didn't know Bob hated the Grand Ole Opry and almost everything else in Nashville. When I told him I had been down there working he really came unwound."

Just as soon as she was hired, Ramona found out why the Texas Playboys were the greatest. "That tough audition was a vacation compared to those practice sessions," she remembers. "Bob Wills was a perfectionist. He was the teacher. I was the student. Hold it. Back up. Try it again. There was no rest until I learned to blend my voice into the Playboy sound."

The little cowgirl was a good student. Soon she learned to sing with the sophisticated, progressive, chord scheme arrangements of the great Eldon Shamblin. Shamblin did most of Wills' arranging. Her yodel breaks were a completely new dimension in Country-Western music and her lead and harmony blends into the distinctive rhythm progressions soon became a new music rage. Growth of the new sound was rapid and opened the door for many female vocalists.

Before Ramona and Bob Wills intro-

duced her new sound, female vocalists were few in the Country-Western field. And even fewer in western swing.

"I just couldn't believe the hard work," Ramona remembers. "My idea of being an up-front singer with a big time band didn't include seven nights a week. On the road day and night. And when not performing, we were practicing. Bob Wills was a master, no nonsense, and a strict disciplinarian. You lived by his rules or got out. I loved the guys in the band. I was afraid they would resent me, but they didn't. They appreciated my addition to their music. Those guys had pride. They were the best and knew it. Really they over-protected me. When riding the bus they watched their language. I told them many times to relax, that I was one of the troop."

The young star had many adjustments to make. There was little time off. The band was always on the road. Then there was quite a discussion as to what she would wear on the shows. Formal dress was out. And Bob wanted nothing that even resembled Nashville. It was finally decided she would wear glamourized cowgirl outfits with a lot of trimmings and color-rhinestones, hat, boots, and a lot of flash. Her dress started another fad for Country-Western female vocalists. "Oh, but did those outfits cost a bunch," Ramona remembers.

More and more the little Oklahoma cowgirl's popularity grew. At each show the crowd wanted more of Ramona. "Oh those crowds were great, especially those on the West Coast," she recalls.

"That traveling was something else," Ramona says. "One time we were splitting across west Texas on the bus. I don't remember the name of the little town. But on the outskirts a man flagged us down. He said he owned a cafe and invited us to stop and eat. We all thought the invitation was for a free meal. So everyone really ordered up — steaks, chicken, and the best. After we ate he demanded we pay for the meal. We did. I was a light eater; I only ate a sandwich. But the boys had really shoveled it in. Did they yell when they had to pay."

There was nothing to do but pay. But after we got back on the bus everyone laughed. We had really been conned."

In 1951, Ramona recorded "I'm tired Of Living This Life" with Bob Wills and his Playboys, and in 1952 she did "Little Girl, Little Girl." Both were hits. "I'm tired Of Living This Life" was on a 78 RPM and "Little Girl, Little Girl" was one of the first big hits on a 45 RPM. Today both are collector's treasures and demand a big price.

In 1952 after almost three years of touring with Bob Wills the love bug bit Ram-

ona. She married a native of her part of the country, Jim Blair, a civil engineer.

Husband Jim tells a humorous story after he and Ramona were married. "We took a tour to Tennessee. Ramona's picture was on all the Martha White flour sacks. Times were hard. And as we drove through the countryside I noticed every clothesline was full of women's unmentionables made from flour sacks. After a close inspection I discovered Ramona's picture was on the seat of every pair, and on the Big Mama size her picture was on there twice."

After marriage Ramona went into semi-retirement. For a few years she and her husband lived in Texas and then settled on a ranch near Clayton, Oklahoma. Between being a housewife and having four children, Ramona continued to do a few shows. When Bob Wills and his Playboys were in the vicinity, she always worked with them. Then she did countless charity shows.

In 1967, when Bob Wills was in the twilight of his great career, he called on Ramona again. They went to the RCA studios in Nashville and she recorded "I Betcha My Heart I Love You" and "Don't Send Him Back To Me." They were both hits and collectable items.

"It seemed all so unreal in those sessions," she recalls. "Bob was using studio musicians and I felt a little sad. They were good, but nothing like the old band. It just wasn't the same."

Three years ago Ramona was selected as a member of the Pioneers of Country Music, by the Country Music Association and Grand Ole Opry, which holds its reunion in June of each year. In 1979 she was honored as one of the featured singers at the annual Pioneers, Fan Fair, Nashville.

Still a petite cutie, Ramona brings the house down when she does an occasional show. She practices everyday and keeps up with all the latest songs, and learns the ones she likes. Last December she was selected Queen of the Little Dixie Opry, McAlester, Oklahoma. She has been a regular on the show since its beginning two years ago.

What does she think of some of the new sounds? "I love all music. But it is no different today than it has ever been, some good and some not so good," she says. "But that new sound title kinda bugs me. Much of what is being promoted as new sounds are the same progressions we were using with Bob Wills years ago. I'm not saying this to raise my ego. I am very happy Bob Wills is getting the recognition he deserves as a master musician. He was."

To show her versatility, at a recent show Ramona brought the house down

when she did a yodel in a cowboy disco beat. She said. "There was really nothing to it. A disco beat is just a takeoff from that old 'Osage Stomp' Bob Wills used to do."

When not being a housewife, mother and singer, Ramona is writing a book, her memoirs. She is writing her own manuscript, no ghost writer. To prepare for her project she enrolled and completed three semesters of creative writing at Eastern Oklahoma State College.

What about more recordings? "Yes, I

get an offer now and then," she replies. "But the only recording I would consider would be an album after I finish my book. And the contract would have to read that I would make no more than fifty appearances a year. All those one-night stands to sell records is a real killing life. I've been there."

Ramona Reed, even though she has received little publicity, is one of the true pioneers of Country-Western music, and her contributions are many. Few of today's female singing stars know that a

pretty little cowgirl from Oklahoma helped pave the road for their success — and that they are using a sound and style that she originated before they were born.

Then there are those Slim Whitman yodeling television commercials. Yes, he is using a yodeling style created by Ramona Reed when she was doing those Martha White Flour commercials on radio station WSM, Nashville, in 1949.



(All Oklahomans can be proud of Judge Phillips of Southeastern Oklahoma — including the author, a Western Oklahoman.)

## On A Leash And A Prayer

— by Vera Holding

gitis, which destroyed the optic nerves. The 69-year-old Phillips had always led an active life and to be almost totally helpless caused him to suffer a terrific trauma. But a keen sense of humor and a great Christian faith helped him to weather this storm. With great determination, he looked around for a school for the sightless where he could earn a guide dog.

In a telephone conversation with a cousin, Beulah Phillips, in Oakland, California, she reminded him that his late uncle Grover Phillips had gone to the Guide Dog for the Blind Inc., in San Raphael, California, in 1942. She volunteered to call the school and request an application blank. They sent the application and after reviewing it sent a representative from the school to interview Judge Phillips. He was eventually accepted as a student at the school.

After the flight to San Raphael where he enrolled in the school, he was in training for two weeks when to his utter dismay he was told he could not continue the training. They contended he was not steady enough on his feet with the dog. He was not only sightless but was weakened by the *Cryptococcus Menengitis*, which caused his leg muscles to cramp while walking.

He had such high hopes of earning a guide dog that he had called a friend in Durant who had a dog run built adjacent to the Judge's home for the expected dog. When he was told he had failed in the school. . . . that he could not have a dog, he said he felt utterly crushed. He had never known such disappointment.

One day, however, he had a visitor who had read about him in an Oklahoma newspaper. He was Austin Hicks, who with his wife Alma, was visiting her brother in Hugo, Oklahoma. Austin Hicks

is a member of the Hemet, California Lions Club, which is near the Guide Dogs of the Desert School.

Austin had driven the 54 miles from Hugo to Durant to tell Judge Phillips about the wonderful school there. "I was a little leery at first, because I had been burned once, but I agreed to contact the school because this stranger had driven all that way just to help me," he said.

The Hickes got in contact with Bud Maynard, Executive Director of the school, which led to the formalities of Judge Phillips' enrollment.

On arriving at the school, Judge Phillips found the training was the same as he had undergone at the San Raphael school and most of the trainers had done their schooling there. However, there was a vast difference in the schools. The San Raphael school was a posh layout with private rooms for the trainee and dog, while the school near Palm Springs had only the bare necessities. In fact it was a "poor boy operation." No school veterinarian, cook, or private baths. It is housed in a 1400 square foot building with two students and two dogs to each small bedroom. There is one bath, living-dining room all in one area. It is located nine miles north of Palm Springs.

"Although they didn't have anything much, they had a lot of know-how, dedication, and heart. They seemed to have an understanding of handicapped people and animals," Judge Phillips said. The trainers help clean the kennels as well as walk the dogs.

Eileen Johnstone was assigned to Judge Phillips as his trainer. She was still a month away from her Guide Dog trainer's license. But she was heaven sent, the Judge said. Within a week after she had taken over his training, she told him he

It was a gala day in Durant, Oklahoma — a celebration for a returning hero when Associate District Judge John Allen Phillips II came home from a session at the Guide Dogs of the Desert School in Palm Springs, California.

Proudly waving her long feathery tail was Brandy, a beautiful part German Shepherd and part Golden Retriever dog. She walked beside Judge Phillips with great dignity and pride. Her brown eyes filled with love as she watched the judge being greeted so warmly by his friends, the townspeople. Evidently she felt that way too.

Phillips says he graduated from the school "Magna Cum Brandy." Though her name may sound a little strange in a Baptist Church where they both attend regularly, the congregation has accepted Brandy wholeheartedly.

Judge Phillips drolly remarked, "Her Retriever mother might have taken up with a beautiful white German Shepherd one day on a trip down the primrose path."

Judge Phillips lost his sight in 1977 from a rare case of *Cryptococcus Menin-*