

# The revival of the Texas dancehall

A cultural essay on renewed hope for the next generation.  
By SD Henderson

**T**WENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, I WROTE AN article on Texas honky tonks and bars around Dallas for *D Magazine*. Out of all of those places, few remain operational today. Over the years, our traditional music venues, places you can go for a beer and see your favorite local artists, have given way to strip malls and parking lots. There have been hundreds of tiny venues to take their place, but nothing like the wide dancefloors and neon hued bars of our misspent youth. What kind of world are we leaving to our grandchildren without sawdust floors and liquor by the drink? Well, maybe that's a stretch, but you get the idea.

A true Texas dancehall is cultural universal worth preserving. It's the tangible connection to Bob Wills and Willie Nelson. It's the place you saw Gary Stewart play for the first time, drunk but spellbinding. The place where an old girlfriend sucker punched you in the jaw. It's the place where you danced with a new girl for the first time, fell in love and then spent the rest of your generally happy life with her. To see a place like that turned into a plumbing supply company robs us of something irreplaceable.

## Wanna Dance?

TEXAS MUSIC REQUIRES A place. It might seem like anywhere south of the Red and north of the Rio Grande might do, but it takes a special place to create the right environment to really absorb the music and distill it down to an essence.

A proper dancehall provides a full sensory experience like no other venue; you see and hear the music played on a stage just over the dance floor, you move to the music and feel it down to your boots, you smell the spilled beer and the cheap cologne; it's almost enough to bring back Rusty Weir from the grave.

Almost all scientists unilaterally agree that Texas music is dancing music at its core. Look around the next time you're in a little hole in the wall bar listening to a band.

Somewhere in the aisles, or off in the corner, somebody is going to make room for a make-shift dance floor. It's the natural, visceral audience response to the band's work and dedication to craft. Anybody can clap, but the true mark of reaching your audience in Texas evidenced by the irresistible compulsion to take two steps forward and one step back.

Sadly, the number of places

to completely immerse yourself in the music have dwindled to just a handful over the years. Fortunately, for the free world in and around the metroplex, a spirit of revival breathes new life into a timeless musical tradition. As evidence of this grand hypothesis, I will point you to three irrefutable proofs of life.

Literally from Downtown to Cowtown and out in the suburbs; there is new sawdust on the floor, music in the air and a whole bunch of empty longnecks



**Took to the task of revitalizing the Longhorn Ballroom:** Amber and Dad Jay LaFrance

in the trash out back.

## Viva El Longhorn

WHEN THE LONGHORN Ballroom shuttered its doors, I feared one of the most important pieces of music history in Dallas was lost forever.

The Longhorn, originally built for Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys in the halcyon days of Texas swing, stood for generations as an iconic fixture of the city's nightlife. From the notable to the notorious, The Longhorn Ballroom transcended dancehall status for decades attracting musicians across the spectrum.

To put it in perspective, ask yourself the question. What do Bob Wills, the Sex Pistols, B.B. King, George Jones, 2 Live Crew, The Red Hot Chili Peppers, Stevie Ray Vaughn and Nat King Cole have in common? The first answer is not too much. But each of them has played a show at The Longhorn Ballroom. Well, 2 Live Crew, not so much; but each of them has either played a show or started a riot at the Longhorn Ballroom.

Pressures of suburban migration and milquetoast musical tastes slowly choked out the traffic around Corinth and Industrial, where the Longhorn occupied an almost ideal downtown location. Slated for the bulldozer, Jay LaFrance and family purchased the property and this year poured his finances and efforts into restoring the landmark, preserving the core and establishing a vision for a rich creative future that taps into a deep past.

The 3.0 version features the requisite dancefloor, and enough space and amenities to accommodate 2,500 people over 20,000 square feet of history. It

goes almost without saying, but the giant longhorn statue out front still stands tall, now as a reminder that the Longhorn is back and ready for another 67 years of Texas music. The history and significance of the location was not lost on LaFrance, who said, "We're thrilled to bring back a piece of Dallas' legacy and save it from being bulldozed to make room for new apartments. We just couldn't let this landmark be lost."

Now just a month or two into the opening, the Longhorn Ballroom is gearing up to take its rightful place in the Texas music landscape. Rome wasn't built in a day, and neither was the Longhorn. At the present time, LaFrance's team is working on booking shows and artists to fill the dancehall as a concert venue while also booking the place for events and celebrations of all varieties. Find them online at [longhornballroom.com](http://longhornballroom.com) to get information on future shows and events.



**The Stagecoach Ballroom remains an elder statesman among Texas dancehalls:** Kiran Desai and wife Jean Czajkowski with Johnny Bush

If you've never felt the leather of a boot slide across the floor at the Longhorn, you owe a debt yet to be paid to the music scene in and around Dallas.

## Mid west DFW

CHARLES HOUK FELL IN love with the Southern Junction Steakhouse the first time he walked into the doors of their original Royce City location. So much so, that he bought the place.

A long-time fixture on the outskirts of town, the dancehall was spared from the slow death that urban dancehalls seemed to face year after year. Unlike other traditional dancehalls, Southern Junction boasted a legitimate cook-your-own steakhouse along with great music and a huge dancefloor.

Houk could have played it safe and just stuck with the one location in Royce City. Just at the edge of east Texas, Southern Junction has always been a great place to eat, drink, dance and see good music; but just a little too far away from town to be considered a local attraction. As unique venue and concept that has been well supported by locals for years, Houk started looking for locations to expand. In October of this year Houk, put the final touches on a transplanted model and moved it a little bit west into the suburbs.

The end result is another new dancehall, well executed and well positioned to bring good music to the culturally impoverished suburb of Irving, Texas. The new Southern Junction Live is located at 101 N. Rogers Rd. in Irving. The dancehall has transformed a piece of suburban sprawl into a venue positioned to be a pillar in the local music scene. It is uniquely and distinctly both

Texas and dancehall. With over 4000 square feet of dancefloor and a capacity of just over 2000, the new Southern Junction is a suburban answer to honky tonk blight.

As a slightly different concept than the Longhorn, Southern Junction is open for eating, drinking and dancing on a continual basis. Mixing a house band with touring artists, Southern



**The Southern Junction has brought a 4000 square feet of dancefloor and a capacity of just over 2000 to Irving:** Dancers fill the dance floors

Junction is ready to become your dancehall of record, and fills an important gap in the musical landscape of Texas. Houk said, "There just aren't enough places that do this. I support live music." This kind of thinking stems the decline of western civilization and keeps writers writing, musicians playing, and keeps slightly overweight people like myself eating steak, drinking beer and dancing to good Texas music. We all win.

## Deep roots

ONE OF THE FEW TRADITIONAL dancehalls to weather the tests of time and public whim, The Stagecoach Ballroom remains an elder statesman among Texas dancehalls. Family owned and operated, The Stagecoach has a long history and tradition

in the annals of Fort Worth's music history. Opened in 1961 by Willie Nelson and Ray Price bandmate Ray Chaney; the club attracts national acts with a flavor you only find in the Stockyards. The new location, at 2516 Belknap, has been the new location for over 50 years.

After changing hands from the late Chaney, who died in a car accident in 1972, the Czajkowski family has owned and operated the ballroom continuously for years. If it weren't for places like the Stagecoach, we might have forgotten how to run a proper big Texas dancehall. Stepping through the doors of the Stagecoach is a palpable experience. Wooden bar, huge dancefloor, and a regular crowd of people that remember Ray Price and a clean-shaven Willie Nelson; it possesses a warmth and charm crafted over years and long nights.

The Stagecoach is as much Fort Worth as the Longhorn is Dallas. Where the Longhorn preserves an edginess, the Stagecoach has maintained smoothness. That sensibility is intentional. Jean

Czajkowski and her husband Kiran Desai have run the Stagecoach to keep country music alive and true to form in the DFW area. The parking is free, the dance floor is huge, the music is country, the drinks are cheap and the people are

friendly. That's a business model that has played well in Fort Worth for half a century.

## Signs of life

IT SHOULD BE A GREAT encouragement to know that the dancehall is alive and well across the metroplex; from the Stagecoach in Fort Worth where it never really died, to the re-birth of The Longhorn in Dallas, where it is rising from the ash heap of history, and all the way out to the suburbs to the western outpost of the Southern Junction in Irving.

Things die and fall apart when they are appreciated in theory and supported in concept. If we want to keep these places and possibilities alive, you've got to pull up your boots and belly up to the bar. Never before has cultural preservation been so much fun.