

Cover Story:

Dust off your boots, because Honky-Tonk Jump is comin' to the Minnesota Bluegrass August Festival

By Marlis Schmidt Photos by Pine Grove Press, Don Olson, Dick Libby

"Imagine a Saturday night at a dance hall in Norman or Muskogee, Oklahoma. There might be 1200 people jammed in the hall, some of whom drove 150 miles for the dance. Some were hard-shell Baptists, oil workers and mule farmers." J.R. Goddard, the New York writer, gave the above account of a scene he recalled from his adolescence.

In the 1920's and 30's, when urban workers around the country came to work in the oil fields of Texas and

Oklahoma, like mud on their boots, they tracked in their music styles with them,

most notably New Orleans Jazz and Big Band Swing music. Subsequently, some of Texas' wildest, most innovative musicians would start reconfiguring traditional string bands. This new strain of dance music would take the nation by storm, change country music, and even influence the future of rock and roll. It was referred to as Okie jazz, Hillbilly jazz, Tex-Mex music, honky-tonk, Southwestern swing and not until 1945 would be coined Western swing.



Pecan Grove Dine & Dance, Dallas, TX

From a living room in Minnesota, Western swing is resurrected.

Fast forward, Minneapolis, spring of 2017, when a 42-year-old Dan Lowinger rode into town with his 1951 Gibson ES-150 electric guitar strapped around him like a modern-day gunslinger looking to start a new life and a new band. He and



Dehl Gallagher, Dan Newton, Joe Savage, Vaughn Asselstine, Dan Lowinger, Tom Schaefer
Photo by Dick Libby

his wife had packed up their life's belongings in Portland, Oregon and headed east driving through an April snow storm in the Dakotas--as a sort of gateway baptism--before finally making it to the Twin Cities. One of his Portland bandmates in his Western swing band, the Barn Door Slammers, gave him one name to look up once he got to the Twin Cities, Tom Schaefer, whose fiddlin' claim to fame would shake anyone's boots.

The Twin Cities has an unusual density of high-quality musical talent and fame for its size - one can stand on any street corner, spit and hit one.

It's one of the reasons Lowinger chose to move here. And all he had to do was show up at Tom & Cathy Schaefer's annual summer jam party and accomplish the same thing, without even having to spit. A long time part of the bluegrass and tra-



Dan Lowinger

ditional music community, Tom Schaefer didn't discover his natural ability to play fiddle until he was 22 when a neighbor by his South Dakota farm handed him a fiddle he had made and said, "Here, try this," and he hasn't put it down since. Since



Tom Schaefer

then, he has received awards and invitations to play with musical luminaries and locals, many of whom were at his party that day, including bass player Vaughn Asselstine and accordionist Dan Newton.

Schaefer saw his party as an opportunity for Lowinger to meet some fellow musicians. As lead guitar player for several Western swing bands back home,

inal Playboys, Tiny Moore on mandolin and guitarist/arranger, Eldon Shamblin.

With roots in cowboy country of Alberta, Canada, Asselstine remembers fondly listening to cowboy music records her dad played. Raised in a musical family, Vaughn plays piano, accordion, guitar and drums and, not one for sitting still, was a rhythm tap dancer before picking up the bass at age 56. Before long, Vaughn, Tom, Lowinger and Newton were "Snatchin and Grabbin" Bob Wills'

tunes in turn. By the end of the evening, there seemed to be a collective, "AH ha," and a band was conceived.

Pursuing the notion of a band, the impromptu jammers invited drummer Dehl Gallagher, another stalwart in the Twin cities music scene, to join. In the 70s he lived on a bus for a year touring with Minnesota's first Western swing revival band, the Radio Rangers. Gallagher says, "When Dan called me to join the band, it felt like I had come full circle back to my



Vaughn Asselstine



Dan Newton



favorite music style and playing with my favorite musicians."

Within a month they had booked their first gig in a small basement coffee shop. When word got out about the all-star line-up, it was as anticipated as the shootout at OK Corral. They threw a list of songs together they already knew; Dehl and Vaughn rushed out to buy matching Stetsons and boots, (the real reason Dehl claims to have joined the group). Even though it was the first time all five of them had played together, in their debut show,

Lowinger was delighted to meet an accordionist who shared his love of the same music. Newton cut his teeth on Honky-tonk music back in Lincoln, NE during its revival in the 70s. That's when he began his studies in traditional and regional music styles, and has since played in many bands reprising them, including his own "Café Accordion Orchestra." Schaefer, who started out playing bluegrass, got his first taste of the Texas music elixir in South Dakota, where he had the opportunity to play with two of Bob Wills' orig-



**Dehl Gallagher
The Radio Rangers**





Photo by Don Olson

they came out swinging, already living up to their new name, “Honky-Tonk Jump.” The instrumentals were tight with syn-copated rhythms handed off between Tom’s melodic fiddle solos and Lowinger’s fast licks, with the Les Paul tone on his vintage Gibson guitar. Dan Newton kept the vocals going; singing Hank Williams’ songs with an ease that’s his own—sourced by his sheer love of the music and the evening. Dehl and Vaughn kept the back beat thumping, and everyone went home happy.

The only thing missing was a dance



floor, for Western swing, an essential to its tenet. Local dancer, Dan Wovcha, said there hasn’t been a Western Swing band in the Cities to dance to in quite a while, so was thrilled with the new addition to the scene and it didn’t take long for the other dancers to catch on. The jump beat of Honky-Tonk Jump reminds Wovcha of dancing the Polish Polka hop, in which you just have to surrender yourself to the beat. Wovcha notes that the variety and complexity of arrangements, particularly on the instrumental numbers, makes

the group stand out from your regular country dance band. Under the guise of “Honky-Tonk” or “Western swing,” you in fact will get straight Benny Goodman, Louis Prima, and Count Basie swing numbers, mixed with your Lefty, Ernest, and Hank in their sets. Sometimes as a break from the jump, you may notice the smooth jazz stylings and improvisations more akin to Django Rheinhardt. A perfect dance band.

“I’ve always been a big fan of all swing music,” Lowinger says. “As a young guitarist when I first heard the great Junior Barnard, (one of my biggest influences) along with the sounds of the twin fiddles and steel guitar, I was sold! The fat boy in “Fat Boy Rag” that Honky-Tonk Jump plays, refers to Junior. It’s just one of a range of tunes in which song titles alone not only reveal a waist line, but the beat variation and geographic origins: “Gulf Coast Blues,” “Montana Glide,” “Okie Boogie”... As for Vaughn, “I play a lot of different styles of music. I like Western swing because it bridges the gap between country and jazz and of course, always -



Wimpy Simpson, Willie Nelson, c 1960

the blues.” If you ever doubted the blues side of this hillbilly jazz, all you have to do is hear Joe Savage’s rendition of Hank Williams, “Cold, Cold, Heart” and Willie Nelson’s “Night Life” to be convinced. Dan Newton generally doesn’t introduce a song by its dance style...he’d rather leave it up to the dancers to interpret on their own. And you’ll see swing dancers, Lindy hoppers, Texas two-steppers and more at their dances.

Twin Fiddles – Instrument Harmonies. honky-tonk jump

As polished as they were, seemingly without even trying, in truth, Lowinger and Schaefer put more thought into the instrumentation of the band. Schaefer said Western swing used Big Band instrumentation played on string instruments. “In general, we are playing parts that we learned off the old records, with a few of our own arrangements thrown in,” Lowinger says. “The classic sound in Western swing is twin or triple fiddles



or twin guitars (steel and electric guitar). When we started the band, we initially adapted this to fit our instrumentation and played the parts with fiddle and electric guitar.” To do that required sheeting out the arrangements and then spending time practicing them on their own and together. But within the arrangements would be the space for improvisation among each of the players, an equally distinctive element of Western swing.

After about a year, the band felt like their repertoire was good enough to get up the nerve to ask Minnesota steel guitar Hall of Famer, Joe Savage, to play with them. And it turns out Dehl Gallagher and Joe Savage had been playing together up in Sandstone, MN, where they both were in the house band for Midwest Country Music Theatre, playing backup

for some of the biggest Nashville legends. It didn't take much coaxing to get Savage to join the fray, and soon they were arranging the songs in 3-part instrumental



Joe Savage

harmonies with the steel guitar, fiddle, and electric guitar.

Joe is a devotee of Milton Brown and his Musical Brownies, the predecessor to Bob Wills by a few years. In addition to Brown originating the concept of fiddle and guitar harmonies, Savage gives him full credit for adding Bob Dunn on steel guitar in 1934. The steel guitar had been popularized from the Hawaiian lap



Dehl, Wanda Jackson, Joe

steel and was NEVER played with country music. Dunn found great satisfaction emulating the sliding trombone and other horn instruments on a slide guitar, which served Milton Brown's mission well of recreating the Big Band sounds. Unfortunately, Brown's band kept growing along with its popularity in the dance halls, drowning out Dunn's guitar. When it came time to record, Brown had him play through a magnetic mic in the sound



hole, creating the first electric guitar. Pedals were eventually added to further increase amplification, and within the next ten years, the pedal steel would become a part of the Holy Trinity of country music.

Most of the band will agree, they're lucky to have Dan Newton as their front man and serving as band leader when they're performing, in addition to being lead vocalist and proudly representing the accordion in this genre. Accordions were introduced in Western swing in San Antonio and Central Texas where the Czechs and Germans settled, and they had no problem mixing cowboy jazz with polka music or sharing their cavernous dance halls. In return, Western swing got a new instrument in their arsenal. Newton recalls that Minnesotans and Texans may have traveled back and forth to escape their respective winters and summers, playing accordions together.

Besides obvious musical talent and

skills that come with years of experience, there is a professional work ethic not always found in early stages of a young band. Honky-Tonk Jump works collaboratively, sharing duties in band management, song repertoire and arrangements. After all is said and done, though, if asked, they'd just say that they're a bunch of nice folks who happen to like to play together.

Just like the early pioneers, all the members of Honky-Tonk Jump are musically adventurous and receptive, looking to challenge themselves to never stop learning and finding the next "Ah-Ha." And we get to be the lucky beneficiaries.

What's next for Honky -Tonk Jump? They have a full summer of gigs lined up. They're thrilled to be a part of the Minnesota Bluegrass August Festival, so grab a lawn chair, and then later grab your partner and jump, swing, and two-step shuffle when they play the Saturday night dance. Or just listen closely and witness as the great masters of the Southwest meet the Midwest.

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Honky Tonk Jump at the Aster Cafe, Minneapolis, MN