

The Light Crust Doughboys Are on the Air

Celebrating Seventy Years of Texas Music



by John Mark Dempsey

Foreword by Art Greenhaw

Number Two in the Evelyn Oppenheimer Series

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The Light Crust Doughboys Are on the Air: Celebrating Seventy Years of Texas Music is Number Two in the Evelyn Oppenheimer Series

Contents



List of Illustrations	iv
Foreword by Art Greenhaw	v
Introduction	vii
<i>Chapter 1:</i>	
“The Best Show Group I’ve Ever Had”	1
<i>Chapter 2:</i>	
“The Light Crust Doughboys are on the Air!”	17
<i>Chapter 3:</i>	
“If You Take Marvin, I’ll Break up the Band”	69
<i>Chapter 4:</i>	
“Seems to Me I Heard a Piano Player”	109
<i>Chapter 5:</i>	
“I’m Going Back to Work for the Doughboys”	154
<i>Chapter 6:</i>	
“I’ll Die with Them, If They’ll Keep Me That Long”	188
Postscript	221
<i>Appendix 1:</i>	
Light Crust Doughboys Recording Sessions, 1936–1948	225
<i>Appendix 2:</i>	
Light Crust Doughboys Discography, 1969–2000	261
References	271
Index	279

Illustrations

following page 153

1. The original Light Crust Doughboys, 1931.
2. The Light Crust Doughboys. circa 1932.
3. The Doughboys in comic regalia.
4. Walter Cronkite.
5. The Wanderers.
6. The famous custom tour bus.
7. The Light Crust Doughboys in Hollywood.
8. Lobby card for *Oh Susanna*.
9. Ad for Doughboys' recordings, 1936.
10. The Doughboys sampling the product, 1936.
11. Ramon DeArmon
12. The post-war Doughboys.
13. The Texo Hired Hands.
14. The Flying X Ranchboys.
15. Hank Thompson poster.
16. The '50s model Doughboys.
17. Smokey Montgomery in the early 1950s.
18. One of many supermarket appearances.
19. Ronnie Dawson.
20. The Doughboys in the '70s.
21. The Doughboys are presented with Texas Senate Resolution #463.
22. Knocky Parker.
23. The 1980s Doughboys.
24. The 1990s Doughboys in rehearsal.
25. On stage with the Southern Methodist University Mustang band.
26. The Doughboys with James Blackwood.
27. Montgomery and Greenhaw with Hank Thompson.
28. In the recording studio.
29. Walden and Baker in the recording studio.
30. The Doughboys with Nokie Edwards.
31. Displaying their Grammy nomination medallions.
32. Smokey Montgomery in the '90s.
33. Light Crust Doughboys, 1998.

Foreword

by Art Greenhaw



It's been said that years after the breakup of The Beatles, George Harrison told Keith Richards of The Rolling Stones, "You don't know how lucky you are, mate. . . playing with your own band for all these years!"

Such is also the life of a Light Crust Doughboy. There have been many times in my life when my dream has been to make music side by side with marvelous instrumentalists and singers such as Smokey Montgomery and the current Light Crust Doughboys: Jerry Elliott, Bill Simmons, John Walden, Jim Baker, and Dale Cook.

Being a Light Crust Doughboy is being able to count your blessings. Smokey often said, "I'm the luckiest banjo player in the world." What a wonderful personality trait! What a tremendous philosophy of life: To delight in one's journey and not one's destination; to bloom where one is planted; to find happiness from within instead of from without. And Smokey's personal philosophy shines through, even in his absence, in the authenticity of The Light Crust Doughboys' stage shows . . . the purity of non-formula, non-commercial music, the music of the soul.

We Doughboys were further blessed when we learned that John Mark Dempsey was going to preserve the history of the group in this book. His love of the Light Crust Doughboys and his deep knowledge of the Texas broadcasting history of which the group is an important part meshed with our vision of how we wanted to be remembered, even as we continue to perform and record. Maybe we're not making Billboard Top Ten hits yet, but we are getting Grammy nominations for Top 5 in the world in our categories!

Other blessings of being a Light Crust Doughboy include being able to do the music we want to be doing; being able to run our own bandstand-type independent record label; being able to compose and arrange as we choose and according to our visions; having the

freedom to pick who we want to collaborate with in a musical sense; and having the opportunity to inspire new generations of young people to be participants in the most dynamic and popular art form of all—music! And while we're at it, we also like to strike some blows along the way for individuality, self-reliance, non-conformity, and the overcoming of fragile and unworthy authority.

In 1996, a newspaper editor asked Smokey what he'd like to be doing at the end of his life. "Exactly what I'm doing now: making music," was his reply. I've always had as my goal both that Smokey philosophy and the words of the old monk who was asked as he was hoeing his garden, "Master, if you knew you had one hour left to live, what would you do?"

The master answered, "I would just keep on hoeing my garden."

To Smokey and The Light Crust Doughboys who have fought the good fight and run the race: rest high on some eagle's wings.

To The Light Crust Doughboys still doing it and doing it so well: play on, old friends, play on. . . .

Introduction



This book was a race against time. We lost. But, even so, it was a triumphant experience.

When work on this history of the Light Crust Doughboys began in the summer of 2000, 87-year-old Marvin “Smokey” Montgomery was still regularly performing with the group, indeed, was the on-stage leader of the Doughboys. He had joined the group in 1935 at the height of its radio popularity, and became its undisputed leader when the Doughboys were reorganized after a hiatus during World War II. He was not wheeled out for sentiment’s sake, to take a bow or perform a token tune on his beloved four-string tenor banjo; as anyone who saw the Doughboys perform in recent years will attest, he was a powerful musical force, right up to the end. But as time went by, the leukemia that had been under control for awhile began to assert itself once again, and his health became increasingly frail. Everyone hoped, of course, that he could somehow recover and continue to play with the Doughboys for many more years. But, if that was not to be, we hoped we could complete the book and publish it while he was still around physically. We didn’t make it. Smokey Montgomery’s remarkable life came to an end on June 6, 2001 at the age of 88.

But a saving grace was that Smokey, still very clear of mind, was able to read an early manuscript of this book less than two weeks before he died. He went through it page by page, and made a few small corrections. The one thing he most wanted to correct was an anecdote that portrayed the Depression-era Doughboys, at least on one particular occasion, as having a little too much to drink and getting too raucous. “Never happened,” he told me. “We were not a rowdy bunch.” He was not overly upright about it, but he wanted to set the story straight. Done.

Another vignette from Smokey’s final days is related to this book. As I was going through the process of checking facts, I had sent a

list of questions to Smokey and his wife Barbara by e-mail (Smokey was very up-to-date). He wanted to answer the questions over the phone rather than by responding to the e-mail message, but he was going into the hospital that day for a leukemia treatment and would be there overnight. Barbara called and told me they would be home the next day and Smokey would call. Of course, under the circumstances, I didn't really expect a call. The next day, Barbara called and said, "Smokey is very tired and wants to take a nap, so he won't be able to talk to you today, but he wanted me to call and tell you." Wow. I'm accustomed to people not returning phone calls and forgetting to do what they say they'll do. Happens all the time. I sometimes do it myself. But here was a man within weeks of his death, and he was still taking the trouble to be thoughtful. Exceptional.

Smokey Montgomery received a funeral service befitting his status as a Texas music legend. The Hall of State at Fair Park in Dallas was the setting. Smokey's Dixieland group, the Bearkats, performed, as did the Dallas Banjo Band, which was Smokey's brainchild. And, of course, the Light Crust Doughboys took center stage, with Smokey's stool placed before his microphone, and his beloved tenor banjo resting on its stand between keyboard player Bill Simmons and fiddler John Walden. The Doughboys performed Art Greenhaw's gospel composition, "Sending Me You," Smokey and his wife Barbara's song, "Lord, Take All of Me," and "How Great Thou Art." After the service, the Bearkats led a New Orleans-style musical procession to the hearse, and again from the hearse to the grave.

The Light Crust Doughboys will carry on, as Smokey wished. Of course, if the Doughboys had never performed again after Tojo and Hitler knocked them off the air in 1942, their story would be worthy of a book. But, under Smokey's leadership, a new Doughboys group came together after the war, and that group continues performing and recording to this day. Theirs is a record of longevity, musical excellence, and popularity that is unrivaled in country or pop music.

Chapter 1 describes a Light Crust Doughboys performance in the last year of Smokey Montgomery's life, when they were in their 66th year of performing as a band, not including the wartime years when the band was inactive. Under the leadership of the youthful Art

INTRODUCTION

Greenhaw, the Doughboys are continuing to perform and record. As a member of a younger generation of Texas troubadours, Robert Earl Keene, says, “The road goes on forever and the party never ends.” And so, this book presents the story of the Light Crust Doughboys—yesterday, today, and tomorrow, from their beginnings with Bob Wills, Milton Brown, and W. Lee O’Daniel to the present and whatever the future may bring.



It is not possible to thank everyone who helped me in developing this book. But special thanks to Art Greenhaw and all of the Light Crust Doughboys, Fran Vick and Karen DeVinney with the UNT Press, Cary Ginell, Kevin Coffey, Janis Stout, and, most of all, Smokey.



CHAPTER ONE

*"The best
show group
I've ever
had"*



When the tale of the Light Crust Doughboys began, Herbert Hoover was president. The majority of Texans, indeed, the majority of Americans, still lived and toiled on the farm. Car travel had begun to transform the nation, but the great interstate highway system existed only in the minds of a few visionary dreamers. Of course, there was no Internet and no television, and while the medium that would make the Doughboys stars all over the Southwest—radio—had already captured the imagination of millions of listeners, it remained only a rumor to many rural Texans. So what would have been the chances, back in 1931, that the Light Crust Doughboys would be taking the stage on a warm summer night amidst

the opulent, high-tech ambience of North Dallas in the first year of a new millennium?

The 90-degree heat does not deter a crowd of Doughboys fans, standing in line, patiently waiting for the dinner theater doors to open. Many of them are gray-haired and wear bifocals, but others would not look out of place waiting in line for a Dixie Chicks show. Young or old, they're all here to enjoy an evening of Western swing (along with a gaggle of other musical styles), played by a band whose roots reach down to the very beginnings of the music.

Backstage inside the small theater, the Light Crust Doughboys filter in one by one for the show, still more than an hour away. They're dressed in starched, pale magenta and indigo Western shirts and bolo ties. The talk is easy and familiar, and only occasionally touches on music. Someone brings up Louis Armstrong, and ventures that he was a part of a vanishing breed of jazz musicians. "We're very close to a vanishing breed ourselves," another Doughboy reminds him. "These old Western swing guys—there aren't too many of 'em left."

Finally, a wiry man with steel-gray hair, a bristling mustache, and dark piercing eyes saunters in. He has the air of relaxed, confident authority. Someone anxiously asks Marvin "Smokey" Montgomery, a Doughboy since 1935, about the arrangement of a particular song on the set list for that evening's show. "We'll make it up as we go along," Smokey replies reassuringly. "I'll do like Bob Wills used to do, I'll point at you, and you play every lick you know. . . . We rehearse, but we never do 'em the same way we rehearse 'em." He may sound casual, but before the show begins, Smokey will instruct all of the Doughboys on the parts they'll play.

Time has mellowed Smokey. He notices when someone plays the wrong chord in a tune, but doesn't make an issue of it. Still, the intensity of his drive for musical perfection remains strong. "It doesn't make much difference. Nobody knows the difference but us. Maybe most of them [the Doughboys] don't know the difference except me, but I know the difference every time we play it, because it hits a bad chord right here. We played it last night. I almost got sick at the stomach, but I didn't. In the old days, I'd have chewed them out. Now, what the heck" (Montgomery oral history, 106–7).

“He identifies with young groups and is young. Marvin will always be young,” pianist Knocky Parker, Smokey’s old Light Crust Doughboys partner, commented admiringly (Interview, January 10, 1984).

Even after time eventually catches up with Smokey, he’ll still have his say. “I’ve got them [his pallbearers] all picked out. I’ve got the music picked out. I’m going to do a tape recording of me talking, telling a lot of bad things about a lot of guys I know,” he said, tongue definitely in cheek (Oral history, 107).

A long-time Doughboy, Muryel “Zeke” Campbell, gave Smokey due credit for holding the group together far past the time of their radio heyday. “They haven’t been on the radio all these years, but they’ve been going continuously since the beginning. Marvin kind of took over,” Zeke said (Oral history, 74).

In the dinner theater, the Light Crust Doughboy fans wait with anticipation. Some, like Virgil and Virginia Summerall of Dallas, have been Doughboy fans since the days of W. Lee O’Daniel, the flour salesman who built his fame as the Doughboys’ master of ceremonies into a political career that led to the Texas governor’s mansion and the U.S. Senate. In fact, Virgil sold Light Crust Flour himself in a grocery store in Corpus Christi. “Man, it was a big seller,” he said.

Like many Texans, Virgil well remembered seeing the Light Crust Doughboys perform live on their many tours around the state. “I saw him [O’Daniel] several times, him and the band,” Virgil recalled. “Every time they came on [the radio], I turned ‘em on at the store.” It’s his first time to hear the group play in about 60 years, since before he went to serve in Southeast Asia during World War II.

Other fans, like Charlie Ostrander, are relatively new to the fold. “We started following the Doughboys at the Christmas show of ‘98,” he said. “We’ve only missed one show since then.” Charlie is from Massachusetts, but still knew of the Light Crust Doughboys. “I’ve heard about them all my life. But my wife got me interested in cultural events. She’s my cultural director.” Charlie’s wife Marina is Russian. “So I said, you know, in America, we have culture, too. And I said, let’s go see the Doughboys. That’s American.” Marina

said she loves the Doughboys' spontaneity. "It seems to me they're playing for their own enjoyment as much as for ours, and it just feels wonderful," she said.

Sharon Dickerson, the president of the Light Crust Doughboys Fan Club, grew up in Nashville. Her father worked for the giant music publishing company, Acuff-Rose, and was a big fan of the Doughboys, so she grew up as a fan of the group. "I was in Mesquite to hear Hank Thompson [the County Music Hall of Fame member who has his own chapter in Doughboys history] one night, and I got there early and decided to go into Generation's Past [an antique store operated by Doughboy bass player and impresario Art Greenhaw] and met Art and his mother. We got together the following week and started talking about my love for the Doughboys, and he was infatuated with the fact that I had known Hank Thompson all of my life and grew up in the music business. And he said, 'We would love to have you aboard doing something.'" Soon, she was the volunteer leader of the Doughboys fan club. "I publish a newsletter every month. It runs anywhere from four to five typewritten pages. I put it on the Internet, I send out new fan-club applications. I attend 99.9 percent of the concerts."

"I like the traditional music that the Doughboys play, their versatility and their wholesomeness," Sharon said. "They're incredibly talented musicians, each of them individually as well as a group. I've always adored them."

Sharon, a country-music singer and performer in her own right, has a favorite moment in her association with the Doughboys. It happened at a concert. "Smokey kept telling me, 'Don't you leave, don't you leave.' And he called me on stage during the second half of the concert, and he said he thought it was time everybody knew who exactly I was. And he said, 'I think you all need to hear this lady sing.' So Art and I sang 'Amazing Grace,' both with the band and a cappella. Of all the memories, that's the one that got me in the heart the most" (Interview, May 2, 2001).

When the sold-out house has completed their dinners of sandwiches and salads, Smokey turns to the group and jauntily announces, "Shall we go out there and see what it looks like?"

While Smokey reckons the band of the late ‘40s was the best group of musicians to perform as the Light Crust Doughboys, the modern-day Doughboys have their own distinction in his astute judgment. “The best show group I’ve ever had is the guys I’ve got right now,” he said (Interview, January 3, 2001).

On this night, the manager of the theater presents the Doughboys with a certificate naming them to the “Rockabilly Hall of Fame,” along with Lefty Frizzell, Johnny Cash, Roy Orbison, Jerry Lee Lewis, and others. It’s a reminder to the audience that the Doughboys cover a lot of musical territory, not just Western swing, a fact that will become very apparent before the evening is over. Smokey takes the plaque and holds it high, to the fond applause of the crowd.

“They are part of what made rockabilly music bigger,” Bob Timmers, founder and curator of the Rockabilly Hall of Fame, said. “They were part of the tradition of rockabilly. The Doughboys’ innovative Texas swing has a direct link to rock ‘n’ roll,” he said. “Swing helped inspire rockabilly, which inspired Elvis Presley and ultimately rock ‘n’ roll,” Timmers asserts (Barber, June 18, 2000).

By no means is it the only recent honor in the astonishing career of the Light Crust Doughboys. In early 2001, the Doughboys received a Grammy nomination for their recording *The Great Gospel Hit Parade* with legendary gospel singer James Blackwood and the Jordanaires, Elvis Presley’s vocal group. (Blackwood, who died in early 2002, was closely associated over the years with Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, the Statler Brothers, Larry Gatlin, and Tammy Wynette, and, as of 2001, had received nine Grammy awards and 29 Grammy nominations of his own.) In 1999, the Doughboys were nominated for a Grammy award in the category of “Best Southern, Country or Bluegrass Gospel Album of the Year” and for a Gospel Music Association “Dove” award. The nominations were for their collaboration with Blackwood and his quartet, *They Gave the World a Smile: The Stamps Quartet Tribute Album*. In 1998, the Doughboys were nominated for *Keep Lookin’ Up: The Texas Swing Sessions*, also with Blackwood. The Light Crust Doughboys were charter inductees in the Texas Western Swing Hall of Fame in 1989, and in 1995, the Texas Legislature named the Doughboys “Texas’ official music ambassa-

dors." In recent years, they have performed in unique collaborations with the Lone Star Ballet in Amarillo and the Southern Methodist University Mustang Band, and performed in a series of concerts in Europe. In 1999, Mel Bay Publications, Inc., published two books of Doughboy compositions, most of them by Smokey Montgomery and Greenhaw.

The Light Crust Doughboys' place in Texas music history is secure. John Morthland, a contributing editor to *Texas Monthly* magazine, has been writing about music since 1969 when he began working as an associate editor at *Rolling Stone*. Morthland related a story that is often repeated about the powerful presence of the Doughboys in the 1930s and '40s. "Johnny Gimble [a former member of Wills' Texas Playboys] has said this to me, and I've read it or heard it from others too, that when they were growing up, you'd walk down the street at noon and every window was open and the Doughboys were coming out of every window. You could hear their whole radio show as you walked down the street," Morthland said (Interview, May 4, 2001).

After the Rockabilly Hall of Fame presentation, a local radio personality steps to the mike, and intones the historic words, "The Light Crust Doughboys are on the air!" Immediately, the Doughboys launch into their time-honored theme:

Now listen everybody from near and far,
If you want to know who we are
We're the Light Crust Doughboys,
From Burrus Mill.

Like our song, think it's fine,
Sit right down and drop a line,
To the Light Crust Doughboys,
From Burrus Mill.

And I declare, (oh, yeah!) we'll get it there (ah-hah),
And if we have the time to spare,
Sometime when we're down your way,

We’ll stop in and spend the day.
We’re the Light Crust Doughboys,
From Burrus Mill.

Never do brag, never do boast,
We sing our song from coast to coast,
We’re the Light Crust Doughboys,
From Burrus Mill.

Smokey cradles his celebrated tenor banjo on his lap as he sits at stage left on a stool, the only concession to his 87 years. Throughout the evening’s two-hour show, he will hop from the stool to the mike to announce the tunes, josh with the other Doughboys, and charm the audience. “We’ll dedicate this next song to Joe Dickinson [the theater manager] because it really fits him. It’s called ‘Bubbles in My Beer,’” he confidently offers. Keyboardist Bill Simmons sits in front of Smokey, and slightly to the left at the edge of the tiny stage. Fiddlers John Walden and Jim Baker stand at the back, and bassist Art Greenhaw holds down stage right, as guitarist Jerry Elliott steps forward to sing the classic Texas Playboys barroom number.

Jerry has been a Doughboy since 1960, a record of longevity that would be astounding if not for Smokey’s 65 years with the band. “He was the ‘Fort Worth singing sensation of 1949,’ which is strange since he tells us he’s 32,” Greenhaw tells the room. Elliott’s resume includes serving as an arranger for the late, great singer and songwriter Roger Miller. Jerry dips his head and grimaces as he reaches for the high notes, and then rares back and wails, still climbing the scale with considerable ease. He recalled that when he joined the band, the Doughboys were still playing at grand openings of grocery stores that bought a big load of Light Crust Flour, and the Cargill foods company, which had bought out the Burrus Mills and Elevator Co., was still paying the group. “But Smokey wanted to get off the road,” he said, and the group has been playing shows for the simple pleasure of its fans ever since, never mind the flour.

The next song, “My Mary,” was perhaps original Doughboy Milton Brown’s best-known song, recorded in 1935 after he left the band to

launch his own group, the Musical Brownies. The Doughboys themselves recorded the song in 1934 (Ginell, *Milton Brown*, 291–92). Jerry sings the beautiful melody, which sounds as contemporary as any recent hit by George Strait.

While the Doughboys are closely identified with country music, their music actually predates what we today call “country.” Smokey Montgomery: “They didn’t write country tunes then. There wasn’t a Nashville where they made tunes just for country. We were playing all the pop tunes, trying to play them like a big band. We listened to Benny Goodman and Tommy Dorsey and all those bands, Artie Shaw, Glenn Miller. We played a lot of tunes that they played, pop tunes. We would get a lot of songs from south of border: ‘La Cucaracha,’ ‘El Rancho Grande,’ and all those tunes. We did a lot of old breakdowns and old-time East Texas running waltzes” (Oral history, 124).

Early in the show, Smokey shows that, after more than six decades with the Doughboys, he is still very much a banjo virtuoso, as he tears up “Sweet Georgia Brown,” fingers racing up and down the fretboard.

Smokey plays a four-string tenor banjo, different from the more familiar five-string variety. His favorite instrument is a 1948 model Silver Bell Symphonic banjo. He also has a gold-plated Silver Bell Bacon made in 1922, the year when he picked up the banjo for the first time (Tarrant; Montgomery interview, May 3, 2001).

Doughboys shows tend to be informal affairs, not unlike a spontaneous jam in Smokey’s den. Smokey, the undisputed leader and a jovially hard taskmaster, may announce at any moment that the band will play an unrehearsed number. Or he may good-naturedly upbraid one of the Doughboys for some real or imaginary transgression. At the end of “Sweet Georgia Brown,” Smokey, in mock indignation, instructs Bill, “Don’t hit that last chord till I hit the last chord.” The audience enjoys the feeling of “sitting in” as the Doughboys have fun with their music.

A Light Crust Doughboys performance is a guided tour through the American musical landscape of pop, country, early rock ‘n’ roll, gospel, and jazz, besides the group’s home base of Western swing.

They launch into a countrified version of Pat Boone's "Love Letters in the Sand." Smokey relates a story about '50s teen idol Boone hitchhiking back and forth from the University of North Texas campus in Denton to WBAP-TV in Fort Worth, where he sang on a daily program. "Pat's almost a genius, but sometimes he goes over to the other side," Smokey jokes cryptically. Fiddler John Walden steps to the mike and croons the tune in a rich, smooth baritone, his prominent eyebrows and handlebar mustache bobbing, his eyes twinkling.

Backstage before the show, John tells how his father led an orchestra in Wichita Falls, and how he slyly led John into music. "'See that fiddle in this case,' he told us boys," John recalled affectionately. "'I'm going to put it under this bed, and I don't want you to touch it. You'll get a hard whipping if you mess with it.'" Of course, little John picked up the fiddle. "'Which one of you boys got the fiddle out? I'll have to whip you all if you don't own up to it,'" he told John and his brothers. So John admitted playing with the old fiddle, expecting the worst. "But he made me study four hours instead," John said. "He made me run scales."

Art is a frequent contributor of new songs to the Doughboys' repertoire. Smokey introduces Art's song, "Texas Women," saying, "This song was written by Art. He's still researching it." Art, responds, "I had a good teacher in Smokey," to which Smokey shoots back, "As much as I can remember." The song is a bouncy paean to the women of the Lone Star State, in much the same spirit as "California Girls" by Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys.

You mix champagne with guacamole,
Sparkling water, hot tamales,
Got a Texas woman from head to toe.
There's nothin' like 'em in the whole wide world,
They're even better than a honky-tonk girl.

Besides playing the bass guitar, Art sings in a powerful bass voice. Along with Jim, he forms the younger generation of Doughboys and serves as the group's business manager.

"I have to stay spiritually, physically and mentally alert or they'll [the other Doughboys] just run circles around me," Art muses. "Music is our calling, it's not just a career" (Thibodeaux).

For "Pistol Packin' Mama," the World War II-era Bing Crosby/Andrew Sisters hit, Jim Oliver, an honorary Doughboy, joins the group on trumpet. "Gene Autry had trumpet on some of his songs, but Bob Wills had 'em on everything," Smokey, ever the instructor, advises the crowd, which breaks into spontaneous applause after Oliver's trumpet solo. Jim Baker (our "poster boy," Smokey calls handsome Jim) joins Jerry to sing the lead vocals.

After Jerry receives a big ovation for "Faded Love," the beloved song made popular by Wills and Ray Price, it's time for Smokey to shine. "This is one of the first banjo songs I ever learned," Smokey comments. "Just for a change, Bill," he offhandedly says to Simmons, "let's play the first part in waltz time." Smokey's banjo has been very prominent all night as a rhythm instrument. But as they launch into "Bye Bye Blues," Smokey demonstrates the intricate and lightning-fast picking that has made him a legendary player on the instrument, "the man who brought Dixieland banjo to Western swing," as Art calls him. As Smokey unveils the surprising licks, the admiring crowd bursts into applause. It's easy to forget that the man "smoking" the banjo (it's how he got his nickname) has been pickin' like this since Franklin D. Roosevelt was giving Fireside Chats.

"If he is not the best musician in the history of the band, he is certainly among the best," historian Charles R. Townsend, the author of the Bob Wills biography *San Antonio Rose* wrote in a brief sketch on the Doughboys. "Bob Wills referred to Smokey as a 'genius on that banjo,' and added he would select Marvin as banjoist if he were forming an all-star western swing band" (Townsend, "About the Light Crust Doughboys").

Then it's time for the Doughboys to tip their hats to rockabilly, the raw musical genre for which they had been honored earlier in the evening. Giving credit to composer Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup in his tongue-in-cheek fashion, Art launches into a medley of "That's All Right, Mama" (Elvis' first hit) and "My Baby Left Me." Unex-

pectedly hearing Oliver join the arrangement, Art’s eyes widen in mock alarm. “I think it’s time for a trumpet solo,” he announces.

For “M-I-S-S-I-S-I-P-P-I,” Bill Simmons’ own composition, which has been recorded by the likes of Ella Fitzgerald, Smokey calls to the sound technician, “We need a mike, Bill’s gonna sing, and I don’t have a union card.” Simmons, his features dominated by a long, white beard, gets his mike, and he plays it for laughs when the mike attached to a boom starts to droop, but it is the way his dexterous fingers flit across the keyboard that stands out.

“I was working with Curly Williams when I first went to Memphis, Curly Williams and his Georgia Peach Pickers,” Simmons recalled. “One day he came in and he said, ‘You want to help me write a song? M-I-crooked letter-crooked letter . . . ’ He hummed a little bit, and he didn’t have much, he just had the idea. They said kids used to jump rope to that, you know. My wife remembered it [the jump-rope chant]. I told him I’d go home and work on it. I was sitting there at the kitchen table, with an old pencil and some manuscript paper. It was three o’ clock in the morning and I woke my wife up, and said, ‘How do you spell ‘Mississippi?’ Anyway, I finished the thing up, and I did the words and most of the music, but it was his idea. We put it together, made a demo, and sent it to Fred Rose with Acuff-Rose [publishing company] in Nashville. A couple of days later they called and told Curly, ‘Boy, you’ve got a hit!’ They were trying to get [Bing] Crosby and the Andrews Sisters to do it. But instead, Red Foley did the first one [recording]. Of course, we made one with Curly.” Others who have recorded the song are Kay Starr, Ella Fitzgerald, Art Mooney, Snooky Lanson. Bill’s favorite version was Ella Fitzgerald’s (Interview, March 16, 2001).

Doughboys shows are characterized by a striking variety of musical genres. Could Bob Wills or Milton Brown ever have imagined that the Light Crust Doughboys would share the stage with a pair of Russian classical musicians? Two friends of the Doughboys’ faithful fan Charlie Ostrander, Sergey Vaschenko on the balalaika, a triangular-shaped stringed instrument, and Vladimir Kaliazine, on the bayan, an accordion-like apparatus, step forward for a brilliant interlude. Charlie and his wife Marina regularly invite the Doughboys

to their home for parties. There he introduced Sergey and Smokey. "He [Sergey] just has magic in his fingers. And then I heard Smokey, and he has magic in his fingers. And I said, these two guys have got to meet each other. So we had them over to the apartment for a party, and they had a jam session, and they've been going strong together ever since." Thanks to the Doughboys' penchant for a wide range of styles, the sprightly, intricate sounds created by the two Russians seem not at all out of place, and they are warmly received by the Doughboys fans.

The Doughboys perform "Fraulein" and "Cool Water" before Smokey introduces the rare tune that has been around longer than the band, "Listen to the Mockingbird." It's a fiddle *tour de force* for John, who, among other flourishes, reaches over the top of the fiddle's fretboard to hit the high notes. The enthusiastic audience pays him back with wild applause.

It would be hard to top John's rip-roaring performance, so the Doughboys break for intermission, after Art formally introduces the band. Finally, turning to Smokey, he announces. "He's been a Light Crust Doughboy since 1935. That's about 30 years longer than Mick Jagger's been a Rolling Stone. And he looks younger than Jagger and Richards." Smokey puts the spotlight back on Art, saying sincerely, "If it wasn't for him, we wouldn't be here today." Mauve-haired waiters and waitresses too young to remember The Eagles, let alone the early Doughboys, circulate among the crowd taking new orders, as Art jokingly admonishes the fans, "The break'll be a lot shorter if you buy everything on that table." The counter at the front of the theater, covered with new CDs and videotapes, is a testament to the Doughboys' modern-day productivity. Fans mix easily with each other and with members of the Doughboys in the relaxed atmosphere.

In the second half of the show, the Doughboys stretch out. They're joined by Bob Krenkel on clarinet and saxophone, Bud Dresser on trombone and flugabone (a rare hybrid of the flugelhorn and trombone), John Anderson on trumpet and Art's father Frank on euphonium. Smokey nonchalantly announces, "Let's get the horns out, get a little Dixieland going. . . . Scramble one muskrat, I'll be home

for dinner.” The Doughboys then kick off the lively New Orleans classic, “Muskrat Ramble.”

“As their current recordings reveal, the band has always borrowed from all areas of American music,” Townsend wrote. “Everything . . . from country to Dixieland, from western swing to big band swing, from blues to cool jazz” (Townsend, “Doughboys—Yesterday”). Besides James Blackwood and the Jordanaires, the Doughboys have also recorded in recent years with Nokie Edwards, the lead guitarist for the 1960s surf band The Ventures, and with steel guitarist Tom Brumley, best known for his work with Buck Owens and Rick Nelson.

Besides serving as banjo man and master of ceremonies, Smokey serves as the group’s musical arranger. Before the next number, he offers, “I want to show you how the Doughboys learn a new song. I wrote a new arrangement this afternoon, none of these guys have seen it before. I’ll show you how well these guys can sight read. If it doesn’t sound right, it was the computer, it wasn’t me.” The song is “Marie,” the beautiful Irving Berlin chestnut first popular in the big-band era, and a song that one-time Doughboy bass player and vocalist Joe Frank Ferguson helped to popularize while he was with Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys. Smokey confides to the audience that Berlin never liked Tommy Dorsey’s arrangement of the song. “So I wrote a Bob Wills arrangement,” he said. The Doughboys, reading Smokey’s fresh arrangement note-by-note, perform a near-perfect rendition of the old favorite, twin fiddles to the fore. Satisfied, Smokey beams, “You played every note I wrote, band, just like I wrote it. That’s kind of unusual.”

Smokey Montgomery, it is revealed from his stage comments, has stepped into the computer age with the ease of a person 50 years younger. “Looking at my computer, I see that this next song is the most-played song by the Light Crust Doughboys. We’re going to play it again tonight.” It’s Bob Wills’ best-loved song, “San Antonio Rose,” sung with consummate skill by Jerry Elliott, with harmony vocals from Art Greenhaw and John Walden. There is no dance floor in the dinner theater, but a couple is inspired to find a spot large enough to enjoy a spontaneous two-step.

On another occasion, Smokey revealed how the computer helps him maintain his amazingly busy schedule, which also includes performances with a unique group he formed called the Dallas Banjo Band, and reflected on his long-standing love of composing and arranging music. "I've got too many irons in the fire," he said. "One of them is sitting at home, playing with that computer, and writing arrangements for the Dallas Banjo Band. That's fun. . . . When I was with the Doughboys [in the group's radio heyday], I could write a new song, and I wrote a new song almost every day, and we'd put it on the air the next day, because I was making out the [radio] programs" (Oral history, 182–83).

Later, Smokey announces, "A couple of months ago, a fella came up and asked me why we didn't play this next song. I looked on my computer and saw we never have played it. I helped [Dallas Cowboys quarterback] Don Meredith make a record of this." The song is the old country and folk standard, "Wabash Cannonball." Jerry nevertheless sings it with great familiarity, and Smokey, with complete aplomb, crosses the stage to give on-the-fly directions to the four-man horn section, which they pick up easily, knowing to expect the unexpected from Smokey.

Now, Smokey stirs the pot with, "Let's pep it up a little bit. How about the 'Pinetop Boogie'? That'll get it going." The tune, which Smokey learned from old-time bluesman Clarence "Pinetop" Smith (Tarrant), is a vehicle for Bill to show off his barrelhouse piano playing. At one point, he picks up the electric keyboard and brandishes it like a 25-year-old rock and roller. On the beat, Smokey hops out the mike to shout, "Boogie!" When it's over, Smokey gives his ironic seal of approval: "Thank you, Bill. He gets better all the time . . . so they tell me."

"Bonaparte's Retreat" features a swinging, sophisticated arrangement. Smokey, perched on his stool, nods approvingly as he looks over Bill's shoulder at his artful fingers dancing across the keyboard.

Another Western standard performed by the Doughboys comes from their brief but successful movie career. In 1936, the Light Crust Doughboys traveled to Hollywood to make a movie, *Oh, Susanna*, with the singing cowboy star, Gene Autry. While in California, they

made friends with the popular Western singing group, the Sons of the Pioneers, which then featured young Leonard Slye, who soon would be known as Roy Rogers. The Doughboys learned “Tumbling Tumbleweeds” from the Sons of the Pioneers, and have been performing it ever since. The three-part harmony from John, Jerry, and Art conjures visions of mesas and big-sky vistas.

“Everybody listen—this is how we’re going to do it, whether it’s right or not,” Smokey announces. “This is my theme song, I want it played right. It’s called, ‘I Can’t Get Started Anymore.’”

The musical styles and references fly by in kaleidoscopic fashion. Now the Doughboys are venturing into the territory of jazz and blues, with a detour into Elvis country. A bawdy “Sugar Blues” is followed by “Crying in the Chapel,” with Art informing the crowd that Presley’s popular gospel number was composed by one-time Doughboy Artie Glenn.

Glenn is one of the dozens of talented musicians who have been members of the Light Crust Doughboys at one time or another over the past 70-plus years. He played bass and guitar with the Doughboys for a few years in the 1950s. In 1953, as he was recovering from spinal surgery in a Fort Worth hospital, he made a promise to become closer to God. After leaving the hospital, he went to pray at the Loving Avenue Baptist Church. As he walked to the front of the church, tears coursed down his cheeks and the famous words suddenly came to him:

You saw me crying in the chapel,
The tears I shed were tears of joy.
I know the meaning of contentment,
Now I’m happy with the Lord.

The song first became a hit as sung by Glenn’s son Darrell. The Orioles, Ella Fitzgerald, Rex Allen, Sr., and Eddy Arnold later recorded the song, in addition to Elvis’ definitive version (Jones).

After “Crying in the Chapel,” it’s a sharp turn into traditional jazz with the Jimmy Van Heusen tunes “Darn That Dream” and “Here’s That Rainy Day.” And then, hammer down, they hit the

homestretch. On the old standard “You Are My Sunshine,” John, all knees and elbows, nearly stops the show with a sensational fiddle solo. Then they tear into the “Orange Blossom Special,” with the crowd impulsively joining in with rhythmic clapping. John pumps his right arm and leg in locomotive fashion, bends over at the waist, stomping the floor and hopping on one foot as the music reaches a crescendo. So exuberant are his contortions that his glasses fly off and he nearly topples over.

“It’s a natural thing that I do. The music gets to going so fast that I can’t hardly keep up with it,” Walden said, almost sheepishly. “It happens every time I play it” (Interview). The crowd responds to John’s solo with a howling cheer.

They send the happy audience into the summer night with the old Roy Rogers-Dale Evans theme, “Happy Trails,” and, of course, a final chorus of the Doughboys theme. Art pronounces the benediction; he is part of the Light Crust Doughboys present and future, but the words are from the earliest days of the band’s existence: “Remember the words of W. Lee O’Daniel, the governor of Texas and the only person to defeat Lyndon Baines Johnson in an election (‘And live to tell about it,’ interjects Smokey): Fellows, won’t a 50-pound sack of flour make a great big biscuit?”