

WHATEVER BECAME OF THE BOSTONIA BALLROOM?

On the trail
of the big revival —
exploring the
Country Western circuit

by Ralph Keyes

■ Mickey Whalen barely looks at the pictures pasted up behind the bar as he ticks off names. "Hank Williams, Ray Price, Hawkshaw Hawkins—he was killed in that plane wreck with Patsy Cline. Charlie Pride, Willie Nelson, Tennessee Ernie—he played here before anyone knew who he was."

It's a long bar, and there are many pictures. "Wanda Jackson, Ferlin Husky—he used to be a regular here. Lived upstairs with my wife and I. Tex, Spade, Wills—they all played here—all except Elvis Presley and Eddy Arnold."

"Here" is El Cajon's Bostonia Ballroom, closed now except for the bar where a few regulars still show up.

The Bostonia used to be *the* place for live country and western music in San Diego, and one of the best in the west. For years they packed them in by the hundreds, and thousands.

It wasn't what Mickey Whalen had planned. "I came back to San Diego after the war and bought the Bostonia," he recently reminisced. "It was the big band era, so on a Friday night we booked Clyde McCoy with a 22-piece band and drew next to nobody. On a Saturday

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night we had a 20-piece band and bombed again. But on Sunday afternoon I had T. Texas Tyler and turned them away at the door." Mickey grins and sticks a cigar between his teeth. "That evening if anyone asked me a question, I just said 'Reckon so, podner!'"

Whalen would look much more credible dealing in a Tammany back room, or serving up pastrami on rye over the counter, or maybe even managing a fighter as he once was himself—middle-weight. Mickey's words at times seem almost incidental to the gestures they accompany. Clutching his open-neck white shirt: "Do I look like a hillbilly?" Leaning back with arms spread. "Hey, I was the pioneer of this thing." Bending forward punching palm. "I was here when I wasn't ashamed to be called a hillbilly! My wife and I would go out at night posting placards on trees. We weren't ashamed of it."

Leaning back again, "The thing that impressed me the most was the sincerity of the artists. They were only too glad to talk to people in the audience and they thought nothing of jumping in an old wreck of a car with a can of beans and enough gas to get to the next town for a show."

Mickey clutches his fists to his chest, a little belligerent, somewhat defensive, and hurt. "Well if some of those 'hillbilly' manners rubbed off on me, I'm proud of it."

Settling back and looking off he adds, "In those days we were like a family."

But something happened. Or rather a lot of things happened. People got richer. San Diego moved out to El Cajon. Country music went "uptown," de-twanged and cooled for a smoother "Nashville Sound." Its audience widened. Rock got more country-like. Country got more rock-like. Johnny Cash hosted Bob Dylan. "Hee Haw" began. Glenn Campbell changed his hairdo.

And in 1963, Dan McKinnon bought KSON radio in San Diego. After trying various formats without success, he went all-country on KSON in 1964. But not country in the old style with down-home announcers, liniment ads and mimeographed publicity. "Our sound was smooth," says McKinnon today. "No hokiness. We didn't talk down to the audience. We had good jingles. Good d.j.'s. A tight format. Then we began to get into promotion, my forté. Selling."

McKinnon's hair is lighter than it seems when he sells KSON on TV, and

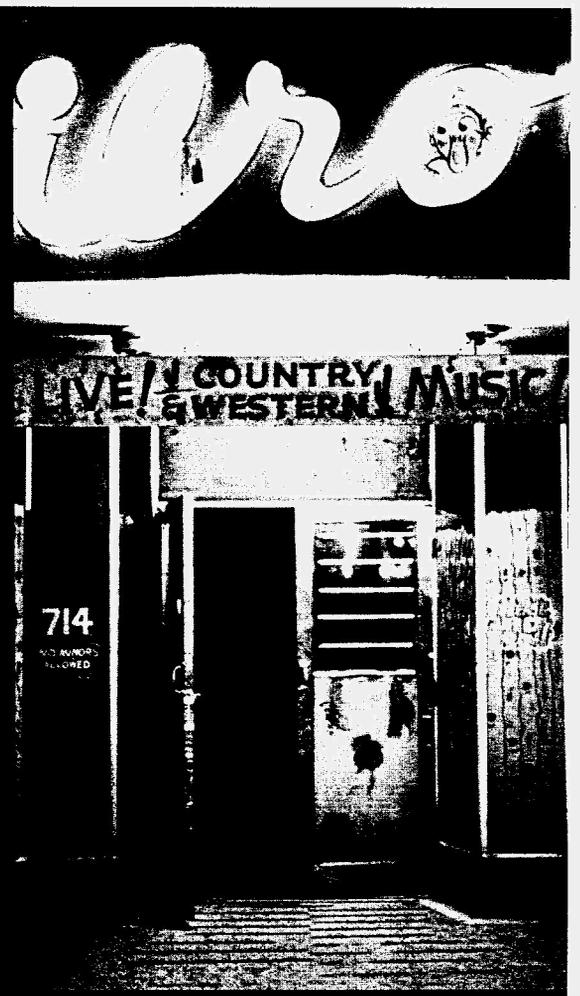
his manner warmer. He looks younger than his 37 years and dresses impeccably. On the wall of McKinnon's cavernous La Jolla office are framed, signed pictures of celebrities—some political, some country and western.

Smoothing his lime-green shirt and adjusting a medium-width tie, McKinnon smiles and says, "Now I've got a ranch out in Lakeside and how I dress there is one thing. Here I dress in a business suit, because we're a business. We had a stigma to overcome, and we did it very effectively."

The country had seen nothing like it. McKinnon handing gold-plated horseshoes to San Diego City Council members. KSON giving out 300,000 leaflets at grocery stores. KSON billboards asking, "Are You Afraid to Say You Love Country Music?" McKinnon in Vietnam scribbling "With Love from KSON" on a bomb.

And it worked. From the outset KSON's ratings leaped. McKinnon proved a tireless booster. "It's time the advertising executives jump on the country western bandwagon," he told a group

of them in a 1966 speech. "Together we can sell a 'gosh darn big amount' of records and merchandise." The next year KSON won the first annual National Country Music Month Award for its promotional techniques. And McKinnon was named to the Country Music Association Board and the Building Committee of Country Music's Hall of Fame.



The Kilroy, last outpost of live western music downtown



Today, KSON is one of San Diego's most-listened to radio stations. And the "modern" sound it helped pioneer is the sound in country and western music here as in most of the nation.

At Clairemont's Moonglo Inn, which has Welk-music six nights a week, manager Homer Smith two years ago added western music on Sunday afternoons and Monday night. "But it's high-

class western," assures Mr. Smith, leaning over confidentially with hand shielding mouth, "not the shiccking kind."

On a recent Sunday afternoon at the Moonglo, the sun was bright outside but the dim lights inside made it seem like any weekend evening. Booths and the bar were packed. Room was hard to find on the dance floor. People there were of all ages and styles, but none wore cowboy hats or pearl-studded shirts.

Buck Wayne and the Buckshots, San Diego's oldest existing western band, play the Moonglo. Now a silver-haired 47, Wayne has played western music since he was a 9 year-old in Clarendon, Texas. He's seen some changes in that time. "It's gone from a western twang to a 'modern' sound that is blending rapidly with soft rock. It's gone from a 4/4 and a 2/4 to a funky beat. We still get some requests for the old style music. But even the older people are beginning to dance the funky beat."

How does Wayne himself feel about all this? "Better change with the times or get out of the business."

But not everyone feels so resigned. The other night at Chula Vista's Palo-

mino Lounge, a grey-haired man jumped up and yelled at the three-piece rockabilly band, "I thought this was a country music place! Let's have some country music like the sign outside says!" The man waved his arms and stomped around. "Shoot! I'm goin' back to San Antone!"

So the band, which had been playing mostly rock tunes, struck up "Is Anybody Here Goin' to San Antone?" and "San Antonio Rose."

As it turned out the protester was really from Fresno, a meat wholesaler now living in San Diego. During a break he explained about his love of country music, "I grew up with it for 40 years. It's music of the people, by the people and for the people. I have nothing against the others. I just prefer country."

The man's wife, a native La Jolla, chimed in, "Yes, we have a teen-aged son who plays rock music on the guitar, but we're hoping he'll come around to country."

The band struck up again and the couple was off dancing.

Fans of country and western tell you it's a much more danceable music than other varieties. You can rock to it, jitterbug, waltz or even polka sometimes.

The other night at National City's the "Westerner," San Diego's largest country night club, Julie was feeling very mellow. When the fiddler played a solo, she got up and did a little jig—all by herself, right beside her table. Nobody laughed at her. They just clapped along.

Julie is a greying Navy wife who said she met her current husband at the Westerner six years ago. "We live in south San Diego," she explained. "It's a different crowd there. They don't hurt us and we don't hurt them."

She kept looking at her listener to see if he got what she meant. She couldn't tell, and continued, "Blacks and whites live there together. It's a different kind of atmosphere. We don't want to hurt them, so we come here."

Hundreds of people pack the Westerner on a good weekend night. It's just a cab drive away from the naval bases and is dominated by sailors, Navy couples, and "Wes Pac Widows." Julie calls herself "old Navy" and says, "When I came here in the 1930's and heard western music right on Broadway it was beautiful, beautiful. We used to have a beautiful place in San Diego. San Diego is a western music town."

There are no western bars on Broadway today. There is the Kilroy, a tiny bar on Fifth Street downtown which

advertises "Live Country Music."

It's cramped inside the Kilroy. The ceiling is decorated with tin foil. A printed poster next to the bar explains how to "Rub out Rubella." A hand-printed sign by the pool table tells players where to leave their drinks, and advises "No Gamblin' Allowed." The pool table is right by the bandstand (which doubles as an extra) and balls keep knocking while the band plays on.

"Six days on the road,

But I'm gonna make it home all right."

A few hands applauded that, and the lead guitar mumbled, "Yeah. Thanks a lot, music lovers."

"Hey," announced the bass player, unwinding his electric cord. "Like the reason I can't get any sound is I'm all tangled up."

"Yeah," yelled the waitress, a Levi-ed, leather-jacketed bleached blonde with beehive hairdo. "It cut it right off."

"Any requests?" asked the lead guitar.

"Carry me back to old South Brooklyn!" yelled the slim, black-sideburned bartender.

"How do you want to go?" asked the guitarist.

"Bent over."

"Okay, we'll put you in a suitcase."

"No—you bend over!"

Not too many people were at the Kilroy that night. The pool players, a few men nursing their beers several stools away from each other, two overweight girls who sat at the feet of the band looking up adoringly. Right in front of them, at the feet of the band, was a big plastic jar marked "KITTY: Feed Me Please."

"What did I call us?" Drummer Russ Church pondered for a second the name of the band he had organized to play the Kilroy. His face lit up. "Oh yes. I call them The Nightriders. I just started the group last week."

Church is 34, a gaunt man with thinning hair and a quizzical look in his eyes. In addition to playing drums professionally for 19 years, Church says he's worked as a miner in Butte, Montana; a logger in Colorado; a commercial fisherman off Florida and a salesman in West Hollywood.

Wearing a spotted, luminous brown trench coat with twisted collar, Church discussed his musical background in a downtown greasy spoon where he was eating before going on one Sunday. "I started out playing western and pop and some Spanish music in Durango, Colorado. I've played a lot of jazz and some



Left and above: Hank Thompson and the Brazos River Valley Boys at The Westerner: "Gimme champagne, I won't complain if that's the best you can do. But when I go first class Fill my glass with Oklahoma Brew..."

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progressive — Motown — rock. I can even do light acid rock — the Cream, Led Zeppelin, that sort of stuff.”

Church drifted into San Diego last fall to visit an aunt and uncle, then decided to stay. He heard they needed a drummer at the Kilroy and came down. “But I don’t even use my own set of drums,” he confides. “They get pretty rough down there. When a fight starts, I give ’em a solo. It keeps up the beat. Ten sailors went at it the other night. If they hadn’t of gone outside they never would have got caught. They couldn’t be heard over the noise of my drumming.”

A uniformed guard stands inside the door of the Valley Crossroads in Spring Valley to discourage that sort of thing. “It’s a community place,” explains Beth Moore, a petite 26 year-old brunette who frequents the Crossroads when she’s in town. “Everybody knows everybody. It has a friendlier atmosphere.”

Sunday night at the Crossroads is jam session night, and that’s when Marvin gets his turn. A 69-year-old eggman, Marvin sits patiently through the house band’s set every Sunday evening, awaiting his turn to get up on stage and thump his ancient guitar, puff on a harmonica and sing a few of the old ones. “Marvin was around when they invented country music,” the bearded drummer tells his audience. “So let’s hear it for Marvin!” And Marvin’s off, banging his guitar, blowing bug-eyed on a harmonica, jumping around, eyes flashing and mouth hollering “How ya gonna keep ’em, down on the farm....”

But it was Beth Moore the crowd really wanted to hear that night, the Spring Valley girl via Michigan and Alaska whose latest record “Put Your Hand in the Hand” reached number 61 on *Billboard’s* country survey. “Beth Moore!” the shouts came from booths circling the dance floor. “We wanna hear Beth Moore!”

Beth was sitting with her boyfriend Charlie, the bartender, and some Navy people from Ocean Beach. “Wanna give us a song please, Beth?” asked one of them, an older man there with his date. “Do it pretty soon. I want Beverly to hear you.”

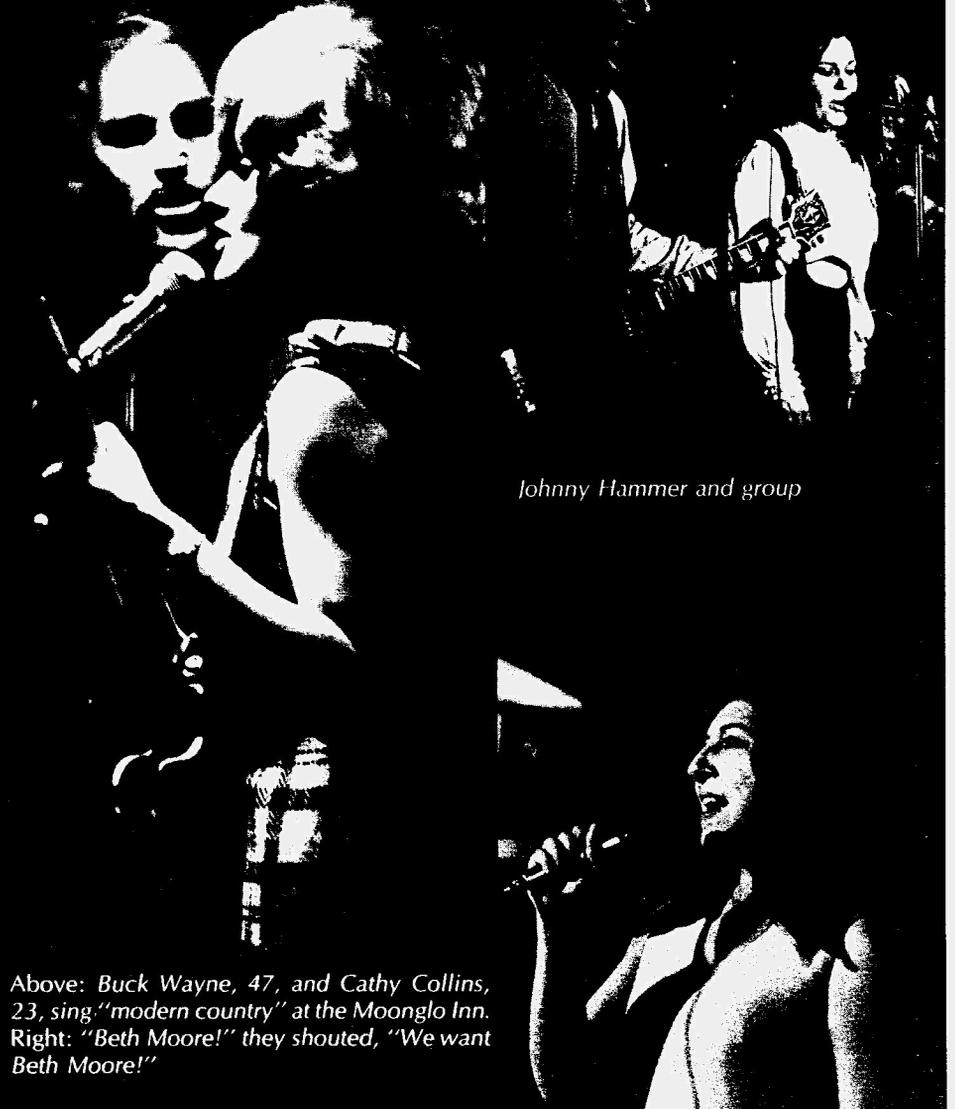
So Beth got on stage, sang some numbers free for nothing and obviously loved every second of it.

Though she tours all over California, Arizona and Nevada, Spring Valley is her high status area. “Don’t you think Beth Moore is another Tammy Wynette?” regular customers ask a newcomer.

For a city its size, San Diego has quite a bit of country and western talent. No



“I was here when I wasn’t ashamed to be called a hillbilly!” Mickey Whalen, owner of the Bostonia Ballroom



Johnny Hammer and group

Above: Buck Wayne, 47, and Cathy Collins, 23, sing “modern country” at the Moonglo Inn. Right: “Beth Moore!” they shouted, “We want Beth Moore!”

one of real national stature, but many talented musicians who shuffle and reshuffle like governments in Syria.

Bob Taylor, drummer and leader of The Rogues at La Mesa's University Inn says "I've played 'em all, but enjoy playing country music the most. It's a hell of a lot more expressive than other kinds of music. It's not so simple as some people think." He gulped a beer between sets and thought for a moment. "I talk, mention people's names as they walk in, ask for requests. We talk to people in the intermission." Taylor finished his drink and smiled. "At least when you play country you can get drunk on the job and enjoy yourself."

A musician for 22 years, Taylor grew up in San Diego then toured for years with Duane Eddy and the Rebel Rousers, a leading rock group. But he's back home now and plays around San Diego in between other work selling cars, driving heavy equipment, tending bar.

"If you name 20 local musicians, they've all played together some time or other," says Noel Kelly, for years a KSON disc jockey and program director who is now with KSDO-FM. "They come to San Diego, and who wants to leave? That's my theory. I came here 14 years ago for six months."

Kelly's employer switched from classical to country music last November. They mix in lots of old country and western songs with new, and advertise themselves as San Diego's "real" country music station.

To KSDO's managers this is strictly business. They surveyed the market, found country and western ("c&w" they call it) was the only sound not on FM, and made the switch. KSDO's d.j.'s have nicknames ("Cousin Herb," "Two-Gun Noel Kelly") and its tone is more down-home, but the station's offices are immaculate, their announcers all suit and tied, and their broadcasting almost completely automated.

Yet to Two-Gun Noel Kelly, it's not just business. To him there are overtones of a crusade. "I do not apologize in any way for country music," says the Muskogee, Oklahoma native. "I feel that many stations stressing the 'modern' country sound are almost apologizing."

In other words, KSON, whose sales manager is Chuck Owen, refers to their new competition as "true-blue Oklahoma." Owen predicts the rapid demise of KSDO-FM and says this new entry into the field has even helped KSON by providing a contrast.

But KSDO is banking on there being enough disgruntled country and western

fans in this area to keep them afloat, older fans who resent the "modern" sound and would rather switch than bitch. To bolster their case, KSDO's managers pull out the hundreds of fan letters they've received in only a few months' operation.

"Keep playing the real western songs and not like KSON-AM which seems to be catering to the kids more and more," wrote one man from San Diego.

"We listen to you while we work," said "The Girls" from Julian High School's cafeteria. "The kids may have their music, but we girls in the Julian cafeteria love 'ya."

A retired rear admiral in Julian wrote that KSDO's music "brings memories of unforgettable days in a small Oakie town where similar songs were stimulus to group effort and group morale."

"My suggestion is," a lady from Encinitas advised on flowered stationery, "be careful what you play in the deep of the night when we are sleeping. Have the music soft. And of a positive nature. As our subconscious mind hears and believes all that is fed into it unless our conscious mind is awake to guard what goes into it. And a lot of these newer songs have a message and not all of their messages are good!"

But one girl from San Diego had a complaint. "I do not care much for the sad tear-jerker ballads that are played so much. We need happy music. Just listen to the 'other' station of western music on AM and you'll see what type of music we like."

Which is approximately KSON's outlook. Far from retreating, Dan McKinnon cheerfully admits, "In the last couple of years KSON has gone more 'modern.'" Distinctions aren't what they used to be, McKinnon points out, grabbing a recent copy of *Billboard* and counting seven of the "Top 100" pop songs which are "country."

Country and western music is so popular today that artists who used to cost hundreds now command thousands of dollars. McKinnon says that as recently as 1968, Glenn Campbell played here for under \$1,000—the night after he won the Grammy award. Today, according to McKinnon, Campbell can get \$29,000.

At such prices, heavy promotion is a must, and since 1964 KSON has been successfully sponsoring its own live shows—now at the Concourse. The key to their success is the barrage of spots the radio station can put on the air plugging its own productions. No independent promoter could ever afford such

publicity. The Westerner recently booked Hank Thompson for one night with little advertising. Though Thompson is one of western music's historic figures, the Westerner was less than half-full that night—below the crowd they had for their house band the night before.

This is what gripes Mickey Whalen. "This afternoon I had two calls from Nashville wanting to book shows," said Mickey the other night as he served drinks at his Juniper Cocktail Lounge in North Park. "But I can't buck the radio station."

He scowled. "Everybody says I'm a bitter old man. In a sense I am bitter. I believe some people jumped in to commercialize. They didn't take into consideration how much blood, sweat and tears went into making country music what it is today. Spade Cooley, Tex Ritter, Bob Wills—if it hadn't been for them—suffering, eating beans, sleeping in the back of cars—there wouldn't be anything today."

Whalen's talk gathers momentum like a steam engine. He peers out intently from behind goggle glasses, gets up close, almost grabs your lapels. "This business was built on people. If the artists hadn't of liked people, they wouldn't have suffered and sacrificed. No one will ever know the hardships they went through.

"People wanna know the artist. There's a lot of people won't go to the auditorium because it's too cold and remote."

Now 54, Mickey sometimes tends bar at the Juniper, sometimes at the Bostonia. He still operates the Ballroom at a loss because he dreams of coming back. "It'll come again. This is an institution. Hey—this is the Mecca of the West."

He reflects for a rare moment. "I don't like to say this, but things'll get good for me again at Bostonia if things get bad. If people think twice about spending \$20 to go over the mountain to the lake. If they say, 'Hey, let's go to Joe's.' 'Hey, that's where I met you.' If people learn how to talk to one another again. When people wanna enjoy people and be with people, I'll come back."

A beer-bellied construction worker walks into the Juniper and interrupts Mickey's train of thought. "Hey, I thought I told you to go home," barks Whalen in mock anger. He and the guy banter for a few moments before beer-belly moves down the bar to join some friends. "I've known him since he was 14 years old," Mickey chuckles looking at the floor and flicking his cigar. He shakes his head, then looks up again. "Now where was I?"#