



HIS COURT: In 1951, Spade Cooley was known as the King of Western Swing. He poses here with what was called his "eye-soothing contingent."

Wide World Photo

A swing king reemerges

Fiddler-bandleader Spade Cooley was hot stuff in the '40s and '50s. Then he killed his wife — and his reputation.

By SHANA TING LIPTON
Special to The Times

FOR those looking down on his star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, the name Spade Cooley probably doesn't mean very much. He was a real-life star once, known as "The King of Western Swing" back in the '40s and '50s, when he led a 30-piece band, was a fiddle virtuoso and hosted his own television variety show.

Now perhaps his greatest claim to fame is an ignominious one: He's believed to be the only convicted killer with a star on the Walk of Fame. On Feb. 8, 1960, the foundation for Cooley's star was laid. Just a year later, at age 51, he sat in a cell in Vacaville prison, serving a life sentence for the murder of his 37-year-old wife, Ella Mae.

Today, Cooley has yet to fully emerge from the shadows of musical obscurity. The western swing genre that he helped pioneer has remained a dusty, albeit inventive, hybrid between country western and the swing music of the big band era.



Los Angeles Times files

TOGETHER: Cooley with his wife, Ella Mae, in 1954. He was arrested for her beating death in 1961 and given a life sentence.

"He's a forgotten man," says writer John Gilmore. "Everyone said, 'Good riddance to that monster.'"

But Gilmore and a handful of other artists are trying to see to it that people not only remember but also hear the complex and multifaceted story of Cooley's rise to success, along with his abysmal fall from grace. In August, Gilmore will release "L.A. Despair" (Amok Books), a collection of dark stories, à la "Hollywood Babylon," that includes a section on the King of Western Swing.

Actor Dennis Quaid has purchased the rights to the three Cooley children's stories. He's written a film he plans to direct and star in, alongside actress Katie Holmes. "My story is really about the battle of light and darkness inside all of us," Quaid says, explaining that it is not his intent to pass judgment but rather portray Cooley as true to life as possible.

Local filmmaker Dave Payne has been fine-tuning his own script for a screen version of Cooley's life. "My story is about a guy who comes to Hollywood and gets treated like a star," he says. "The people around him tried to cover up the murder."

[See Cooley, Page E4]

The rise and fall of a swing king

[Cooley, from Page E1]

A reverence for Cooley's unsung musical talent — along with fascination about his grim downward spiral — seems to be at the root of the renewed interest in his troubled life. He was born Donnell C. Cooley, in Grand, Okla., in 1910. He learned to play cello and violin before the age of 10, after his family moved to Oregon. Years later — as legend has it — he was christened "Spade" during a lucky poker game in which he beat the odds with several spade flushes.

But legend is often muddled by time. In "L.A. Despair," Gilmore claims that Cooley "would tell tales that varied from being born in a storm cellar to swearing he was half Cherokee Indian and his granddaddy'd scalped a truckload of white men." Writer James Ellroy also managed to capture Cooley's vintage grandiosity in "L.A. Confidential" and "Dick Contino's Blues and Other Stories" — both works that feature a "Spade" character in one form or another.

In 1930, the Cooley family moved to Modesto. Just a few years later, young Donnell would join the legions of would-be cowboys lining up for their big break in Hollywood. It was the '30s, in the middle of the western movie craze. Gilmore says that there was a drugstore around the corner from the Columbia Pictures studios where these cowboy movie hopefuls would hang out waiting for work, giving birth to the term "drugstore cowboy." Cooley managed to stand out above the other cowboys by standing in for western idol Roy Rogers, but eventually his acting career flopped.

His music was a whole other story.

Big band, the big time

By the 1940s, Cooley had assembled a big band with Tex Williams handling most of the vocals. He warmed up to future wife Ella Mae, who was in the band as well. They began playing the Venice Pier Ballroom and later the Riverside Rancho in Los Feliz and the Santa Monica Ballroom. The big sound and the high-energy of the gigs attracted die-hard fans — mostly factory laborers working swing shifts.

'My story is really about the battle of light and darkness inside all of us.'

— DENNIS QUAID

Actor, describing the Cooley movie he plans to direct and star in

"People were top-notch jitterbugging, jumping around, cutting loose and going crazy," says Gilmore, who adds that Cooley "was close to a genius with the fiddle." At one such performance, Cooley faced off with musical rival Bob Wills and beat him out for the title of King of Western Swing. Cooley was in many ways a rock star of his time; he certainly dressed the part, decked out in Western suits emblazoned with his trademark spades.

"Anyone that wanted to be a groovy hillbilly came to Los Angeles," says Paul Greenstein, guitarist and vocalist of the Radio Ranch Straight Shooters, a band that, along with the Lucky Stars, and Big Sandy & His Fly-Rite Boys, has followed the western swing tradition associated with Cooley. The Radio Ranch Straight Shooters originally recorded one of Cooley's tunes, "Y'Ready," for Payne. It ended up on the soundtrack of David Lynch's 1999 film "The Straight Story."

Recording a Spade Cooley song, or writing a song about him, has become a rite of passage for today's local western swing bands. Big Sandy & His Fly-Rite Boys recorded the tune "When Sleep Won't Come: Blues for Spade" on their "Night Tide" album. The contemporary incarnation of western swing went through a dormant phase when swing music hit the L.A. scene. A revived interest in country western is currently evidenced by radio shows like "Watusi Rodeo" on Indie 103.1 and the upcoming Johnny Cash movie starring Joaquin Phoenix. L.A.'s cinematically immortalized swing roots have also contributed to a mini-resurgence of this country and

[See Cooley, Page E5]



COWBOYS: Spade Cooley, left, with fellow star Roy Rogers, right. Walter Heebner, center, produced "The Spade Cooley Show."



Wide World Photo

BETTER DAYS: In 1949, Cooley and daughter Melody, then 3, check out his yacht. At 14, she would be swept into a family tragedy.

A dramatic final act and a surprise exit

[Cooley, from Page E4]

swing cocktail. "We get a rockabilly contingent," says Lucky Stars drummer Dave Stuckey.

In May, the Lucky Stars held a release party for their CD "Stay Out Late With the Lucky Stars" at Joe's Great American Bar and Grill in Burbank, which, under new ownership, will have a special emphasis on western swing. The Lucky Stars will also play three shows in July: the Music Center on the 15th, the Farmers Market at Fairfax and 3rd on the 29th and the Derby on the 31st.

A Texan with an equal passion for western swing, Quaid points to a dual quality in Cooley's musical work. "You have this really upbeat, happy music, and there's this darkness in the lyrics; they're all about mistrust and betrayal." Cooley's best-known song, "Shame on You" (also the working title of Quaid's film), has lines like, "Took my car and my money, tell you gal that ain't funny," and "Ran around with other guys, tried to lie when I got wise."

To friends of Cooley's, or those well acquainted with his relationship with second wife Ella Mae, such lyrics have a particularly haunting quality. His marriage was "a terribly destructive, neurotic, co-dependent relationship infused with alcohol," as Gilmore puts it. Parallels might be drawn with Cooley's roller-coaster career.

A television personality

For many of those in the film industry, the era ushered in by television was a death knell. But for Cooley, who never made it in film, it was a blessing. Following his incredible success in local clubs, he was offered a western-style variety show on KTLA in 1948. "The Spade Cooley Show," as it later came to be called, was popular for years, blazing the trail for later song-and-dance programs, such as "The Lawrence Welk Show." But after a time, the format started to get stale, and even Cooley's gimmicky all-girl band couldn't keep the ratings up. The show was canceled in 1956.

This was perhaps the beginning of the end for Cooley, whose far-fetched idea for a resort in the Mojave Desert built around three artificial lakes was also taking a dive. As if in tandem with his financial stress, his marriage to Ella Mae was subject to regular feuding, repeated sepa-



Los Angeles Times files
GOODBYE: Spade Cooley, on 72-hour parole in 1969, waves to the crowd at a benefit show. He died of a heart attack shortly after.

rations and accusations of infidelity. "Spade accused Ella Mae of going with these two guys to sex clubs," says Payne. Apparently, in researching his script, he later tried to track the two alleged wife-stealing Lotharios down years later only to find "two gay guys living together somewhere in Northridge."

Gilmore's story paints a different picture of a taunting, jeering Ella Mae throwing sordid tales of sex clubs in her husband's face to bait him into leaving her. Greenstein and Payne both agree that, apparently, Ella

Mae used her friendship with the successful Roy Rogers to incite Cooley's jealousy. "Spade got to see Roy's career take off, and he just kind of stumbled around the outskirts," says Payne.

Greenstein also points to an unstable man disoriented, not just by jealousy, but also by drugs and alcohol. Quaid believes that Cooley may have been manic-depressive. "Today, he could have been medicated for what he had. He was delusional."

Regardless of the theories of Cooley's last days as a free man, the outcome was nightmarish

Swing time

The Lucky Stars, one of L.A.'s leading western swing bands, continues to uphold Spade Cooley's musical tradition, playing shows throughout July:

7-10 p.m. Friday at the Music Center, 135 N. Grand Ave., L.A., free. (213) 972-3660

7-9:30 p.m. July 29 the Farmers Market, 6333 W. 3rd St., L.A., free. More info: www.theluckystars.com

8:30 p.m. July 31 at the Derby, 4500 Los Feliz Blvd., Los Feliz, \$15. (323) 663-8979

and unthinkable. On April 5, 1961, the papers reported that Cooley was being held in the Kern County Jail under suspicion of beating Ella Mae to death, in the company of their 14-year-old daughter.

In the wake of the personal disaster that took a life and wreaked havoc on his children, Melody, Donnell Jr. and John, Cooley also killed his musical legacy. The King of Western Swing figuratively abdicated his title to rival Wills when he left to fulfill a life sentence at Vacaville.

"Bob Wills never murdered his wife, and he kept the music very pure," says Payne.

Gilmore has taken the controversial position in "L.A. Despair" that it was not a premeditated murder but "an accidental rage, manslaughter." Apparently the authorities agreed.

After years of impeccable behavior and voiced remorse, Cooley was scheduled for full parole on Feb. 22, 1970. Three months prior to his release, he was given a special 72-hour parole to appear at a benefit for the Alameda County Deputy Sheriffs' Assn. at the Oakland Auditorium. The 59-year-old Cooley received a standing ovation from the audience of 2,800. He then walked off the stage and suffered a fatal heart attack.

Payne owns a recording of the odd, impromptu memorial event. Like many of the occurrences in Cooley's turbulent life, art and life entwined in an adicting but irreconcilable marriage. As Payne puts it, "He sang the words, 'Time to live before it's time to die,' and walked back-stage and died."