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TRAVEL

Musical memories in Hillsboro

One man's collection chronicles the history of Texas music

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The small house just north of the courthouse square doesn't look big enough to be a real museum. Has our two-hour drive from Austin been a waste of time?

My friends and I exchange an uncertain look and cross the gravel parking area to the door. The entry area doesn't raise our hopes much. There isn't much to see as we pay our admission fee and owner Tom Kreason welcomes us, but then he waves us through an open doorway and we know the trip was worth it.

The walls in this first room are covered with posters, records and photos. In a glance, I see an antique guitar in a stand, a wild-looking suit in a glass case and a very old, very cool recording machine. My eye is immediately drawn to a display on Cindy Walker, a prolific songwriter who got her start with Bob Wills and whose songs are still regularly performed by local Austin bands such as Heybale.

Turning slowly, I see a whole wall dedicated to iconic black blues musicians like Leadbelly, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton, and others. As I continue to turn, I see photos of Buddy Holly and something that looks like . . . a receipt for suits? A paycheck from the Ed Sullivan show? And is that the Big Bopper?

Kreason gives us a few minutes to take it all in, and then he starts to talk.

"What popular Gene Autry song earned him the very first ever platinum record award?" Kreason asks. "Did you know the first music video was made in 1958? Or that the first real rock 'n' roll riff was recorded in 1949?"

To prove his point, Kreason plays the recording of the early riff, and sure enough, we can hear where Chuck Berry got his groove. On a vintage 1958 television, complete with the original stand, he plays a tape of the Big Bopper singing his biggest hit, "Chantilly Lace," followed by humorous titles and more footage of the

Bopper singing about his wedding to a mannequin in a wedding dress. It's fascinating, funny and hard to believe that J.P. Richardson, aka the Big Bopper, could have been that prescient.

Kreason points to framed lyrics for that first-ever platinum recording by Gene Autry: "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer."

So begins more than an hour of fascinating stories, facts, history and anecdotes about many of the musicians who gained their fame in Texas or claimed it as home.

It takes more than luck to amass the kind of collection you'll find at the Texas Musicians Museum; it takes years of focused hunting, inside knowledge and a lot of contacts. Kreason began collecting music memorabilia for the Hard Rock Cafés in the 1980s. He also had other music industry-related business interests over the last three decades that brought him in contact with many up-and-coming acts. In fact, he made one of the items in his museum, an all-access pass made for the Dixie Chicks before they began touring.

When he and his wife, Marianne, decided it was time to honor Texas musicians with their own museum, he already had a wealth of treasures at hand. As word got out that he was looking for more, his contacts from his Hard Rock Café days got in touch and the collection started to grow.

"Did you know that if Texas was its own country, like many Texans would like it to be, it would boast more music stars and Grammy award winners than any other country, including the entire rest of the U.S.?" asks Kreason. When you stand in his museum, it's easy to believe.

In 2007, Kreason scored a unique and bizarre exhibit: the casket of the Big Bopper. "The family was having the casket dug up so it could be moved to a place where a proper memorial could be built," Kreason explains. "Richardson's son wanted the casket opened so he could see his father, who had died before he was born. Once the seal had been broken, the body had to be reburied in a new casket, so his son offered to let us have the original on long-term loan."

The strangest part, though, is that when the casket was opened, the Big Bopper's body was still completely intact. "He looked just as he did the day they buried him, except that he was just a bit discolored," Kreason says. "Even the creases in his suit were still perfect."

Kreason has the casket in its own space, so those who might find it a bit too macabre don't have to see it. For the rest of us, however, he's replicated the way the casket was displayed in photos from the funeral. Even the guitar-shaped wreath that was supposedly sent by Elvis is there.

Texas music is not just about country or the early days of rock 'n' roll and the blues. Along with memorabilia from Willie Nelson, Stevie Ray Vaughan and Bob Wills, the Texas Musicians Museum has displays on Selena, hip-hop star Usher, Beyoncé, ZZ Top, and the collection just keeps growing.

There are clothes from Barbara Mandrell, Jim Reeves, Hank Thompson, Tanya Tucker and others. There are guitars, early paychecks of laughably small sums for people who are now rich and famous, original records, posters, concert tickets, notes and many photos.

Best of all, there are Kreason's stories. They alone are worth the price of admission. His depth of knowledge and passion for these artists bring the objects in the museum to life and make these music legends seem

more real.

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