

Larry "Pedro" DePaul

# THE ACE BEHIND THE KING OF SPADES

by Kenneth Rainey



The charismatic Spade Cooley and the band he assembled to play dances at Venice Pier in 1942 refined the sound of western swing. Chief among the architects of that sound was accordionist and arranger Larry "Pedro" DePaul.

Country music was booming in Los Angeles during the Second World War. Fed by thousands of defense workers from Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Missouri who had grown accustomed to Bob Wills's music, an enormous dancehall scene developed in the area. The biggest names in western swing—including Wills himself—migrated to the area to work the dances and enjoy all the fringe benefits of being in the capitol of the entertainment industry. But it was a band formed in Los Angeles around a charismatic, transplanted Oklahoman that refined the sound of western swing. This

was the group assembled around Spade Cooley to play dances at Venice Pier in 1942. Bob Wills's Texas Playboys and other western swing groups used arrangements which were pieced together and memorized by musicians in rehearsals, commonly referred to as "head" arrangements. The Cooley band, however, worked from written arrangements in which each instrumental part was precisely notated. This distinction was essential in separating Cooley's group from similar groups of the day. The sound of the Cooley band will be familiar to any fan of western swing, but few know much about the man who was the architect of that sound—accordionist and arranger Larry "Pedro" DePaul.

DePaul created tightly-knit musical arrangements for the Cooley band and for Tex Williams's Western Caravan, a group of former Cooley sidemen who left with singer Sollie Paul "Tex" Williams in the summer of 1946. These arrangements emphasized sweet fiddle playing in close harmony with the primary melody in an interior voice (a style dictated partly by Spade's technical limitations as

a fiddler), contrasted with hot playing from the guitar section and laid over a solid rhythm section anchored by DePaul's accordion. DePaul's imaginative arrangements—combined with Cooley's flash and showmanship and the outstanding musicianship of the group—took western swing into a new era.

Larry DePaul was born April 1, 1919, in Cleveland, Ohio. (The stage name "Pedro" was later given to him by Cactus Soldi's wife, singer Ginger Snow.) He displayed an aptitude for music at an early age, and at age seven began formal training on the violin. By nine he was enrolled in the Hungarian Conservatory, a school of music in Cleveland, and also participated in a city-wide youth orchestra where he began studying the trombone. This formal training in the rudiments of instrumental performance as well as in harmony and orchestration would be essential in DePaul's later career as an arranger. An uncle encouraged DePaul to take up the accordion by loaning him an instrument and offering to pay for lessons, so at age fifteen DePaul began playing the instrument that would secure his place in two of the

most popular bands of their era. By the time he was seventeen, he was performing five days a week on station WGAR in Cleveland, playing in the early morning before school and afternoons after school. It was there he was first exposed to western music while playing with the Hick'ry Nuts, who later became the Rhythm Rangers (not to be confused with the later West Coast group of the same name).

While DePaul was playing for WGAR, Texas Jim Lewis came to Cleveland to play on station WJAY. Lewis's band, the Lone Star Cowboys, featured two musicians who would become fixtures in the Cooley and Williams bands and with whom DePaul would play for two decades—fiddler Andrew "Cactus" Soldi and guitarist Eugene "Smokey" Rogers. A dispute between the radio station and the musicians' union led to DePaul's departure from WGAR, but he quickly found work with hotel bandleader Gene Kunk who worked six nights a week at the Bancroft Hotel in Springfield, Ohio, about one hundred and fifty miles southwest of Cleveland. By September of 1938, the nineteen-year-old DePaul was working steadily with Kunk, playing accordion and doubling on violin.

In April 1939 Texas Jim Lewis came to the Bancroft Hotel to hire DePaul for a string of theater and nightclub engagements. DePaul went on the road with Lewis for two years. The group eventually found their way to Hollywood where they auditioned for Universal Studios. The group made a few shorts for Universal, but eventually the work dried up, and Cactus Soldi and Smokey Rogers headed home to Detroit. The

group brought in fiddlers to take Soldi's place, and Tex's brother Jack Lewis (a.k.a. Jack Rivers) came in to take Smokey's place. The group performed on KMPC in Beverly Hills and KFI in Hollywood, and recorded for Decca. Much of the group's work was standard western fare, but their few experiments—such as a wonderful performance of the Benny Moten jazz standard "South" recorded for Decca—demonstrated their facility with swing music as well. Shortly after World War II broke out, Lewis was drafted into the army. By the spring of 1942 DePaul found his way into what would become the most interesting country band of its day, the group assembled around fiddler Donnell Clyde "Spade" Cooley.

The Cooley band was pieced together by Los Angeles disk jockey and budding ballroom entrepreneur Bert "Foreman" Phillips to play dances at Venice Pier, an enormous ballroom overlooking the Pacific ocean. With the prospect of steady work, DePaul sent for Smokey and Cactus back in Detroit, and the two quickly became part of the expanding Cooley band. As the band grew, DePaul became interested in creating a more cohesive sound for the group. DePaul remembered, "I talked to Spade Cooley about augmenting the band—creating a fiddle section and a guitar section—putting swing into western music and styling the music after the big bands. I offered to make the musical arrangements."

Arrangers are far too often neglected in histories of popular music. Bandleaders invariably get credit for a band's sound (indeed, some authors credit Cooley for the band's arrangements), while

arrangers seldom get even a mention for their work. Occasionally, as with Duke Ellington, the bandleader, composer, and arranger are one in the same. More often, though, arrangers work anonymously behind the scenes in a demanding and sometimes tedious job. They also work in an often nebulous area of American copyright law: The use of arrangements is not monitored by performing rights agencies, and arrangers seldom receive compensation for their work beyond the day laborer's wage paid for the original work. Beyond that, an unwritten rule of the music business allows bandleaders to attach their names to any original works composed by members of their groups. The copious songwriting credits of Spade Cooley, or any other bandleader of the day, must be viewed with some suspicion, especially with "collaborative" works.

When a band plays from written arrangements, as the Cooley band began to do in 1942 when DePaul joined, someone has to sit down and write out the parts for different instruments. Mediocre arrangers—such as those who cranked out "stock orchestrations" for music publishing companies in the first half of this century—work from a piano and are strictly bound to the conventions of piano playing. Good arrangers understand the instruments for which they are writing; they write music which is idiomatic for those instruments and takes advantage of the unique tonal qualities of individual instruments and combinations of instruments. Great arrangers not only understand the instruments for which they are writing, but also the talents of the musicians in their group. Their

work is designed to showcase the unique abilities of the players.

An arranger begins with an understanding of the basic song, namely its melody and harmony. The arranger finds ways of embellishing the tune without wrecking the integrity of the original. Harmonies are usually spiced up a bit, and a solid introduction and conclusion are added. The arranger then works to strike a balance between individual and ensemble work in the piece. Different instruments are assigned roles in the arrangement: some play the primary melody, some play secondary melodies, and others play the supporting harmony and rhythm. The arranger writes out a full orchestral score of all the different instrumental parts, and then begins the laborious process of transposing for different instruments and writing out parts for each individual instrument. This, in the days before photocopiers and computerized notation programs, takes a very long time. And while Duke Ellington had Billy Strayhorn to help him orchestrate and write out parts, DePaul did almost everything himself. "From the time I started with the Cooley band," he recalls, "I wrote a ton of arrangements without any pay. The same goes for every bandleader with whom I've been associated. So I call myself the 'Lone Arranger.'"

Playing well from written arrangements demands a certain type of musician, and while western swing bands had occasionally included schooled musicians (Boudleaux Bryant from Hank Penny's Radio Cowboys, for example), the Cooley band would be the first western swing band to work exclusively from written arrangements. This distinction was essential in distinguishing the Cooley

band from other western groups of the day. It doesn't mean, as some have asserted, that the Cooley band didn't improvise. Nor does it mean that bands who performed head arrangements exclusively *always* improvised. The difference is subtle but important. A "head arrangement" is a kind of collective arrangement in which individual musicians create their own parts for a tune. Despite the fact that they are not written down, they can be just as fixed as written arrangements. But while parts in a head arrangement are personalized by the musicians, bands playing from written arrangements are performing what a single individual—the arranger—has created. Sight reading skills and a strong memory are essential, as is the ability to improvise when called upon to solo.

To bring in musicians better suited to play DePaul's arrangements, Cooley held auditions for a second group. The core of his original group, including the talented guitarist Cene Haas and steel guitarist Dick Roberts, wound up with Happy Perryman at another Phillips ballroom, the Riverside Rancho. Within a week the Cooley band had added two of its most important players—guitarist Johnny Weis and the extraordinarily gifted teenage steel guitarist Earl "Joaquin" Murphey—as well as a fiddle section of Cooley, Soldi, and Rex Call. While the prewar Texas Playboys had expanded their instrumentation substantially from their early days as a Texas fiddle band, adding saxophones, clarinet, trumpet, and trombone—enough brass to convincingly play big band hits—Foreman Phillips was not fond of brass in country bands. The Cooley band

expanded in a different way by adding strings, as well as a vocal trio and female vocalist similar to what so many mainstream dance bands carried. The group also added what was a novelty for a western band—a harp, played by Paul “Spike” Featherstone. The Cooley sound was built around three violins playing tight harmony and inspired section work from Weis and Murphey. Cooley was an energetic and animated bandleader who projected a very likeable stage persona—a combination of big city glitz and down-home charm. He was able to maintain a perpetual toothy grin while onstage (a skill which would aid his later transition to television), and his physical approach to the violin (with dramatic long bow strokes and an active upper and lower body) went over well in the enormous country dance halls in which he played. Cooley was a remarkable showman, and the incredibly tight band clad in flashy Nathan Turk-designed suits was a hit with the public. The group played to capacity crowds at Venice Pier on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday nights, and they also packed in crowds for their Wednesday and Thursday night performances at the Riverside Rancho.

Sadly, the band developed during the eighteen-month recording ban instituted by American Federation of Musicians head James Petrillo, a time when no new records were being made. Cooley signed a contract with Columbia Records in September of 1943, and on December 4, 1944, the group cut their first five songs for the label. “Shame on You,” a last minute addition to the session, brought Cooley his first national attention. The song went to the top of *Billboard’s*

charts in early 1945 and stayed on the charts for thirty-one weeks, but DePaul was not around to enjoy the success. Drafted into the army and sent to the Pacific to serve under MacArthur, DePaul was replaced in the Cooley band by accordionist George Bamby.

After training, he worked patrol duty in the Philippines before he auditioned for a military band in Manila. DePaul and one other gentleman were selected from a pool of forty musicians, and he joined the band on the euphonium, a baritone horn. He was also placed in charge of a five-piece combo in which he played accordion for officers’ dances and parties.

When DePaul was discharged from the army in January 1946, he returned to the Cooley organization. The Cooley group was bigger than ever, expanded by returning servicemen. There was also the addition of Ossie Godson on vibes and piano, who had undertaken some of DePaul’s arranging chores in his absence. They made more records in the spring and early summer of 1946, including a session on May 3 which produced “Oklahoma Stomp” and “Three Way Boogie.” Both songs displayed the cohesive ensemble sound of the group as well as the remarkable improvisatory talents of the individual members. The group was beginning to unravel, though, and that summer the core of the group left with singer Tex Williams to form the Western Caravan.

Several different accounts of the split have found their way into print, and several more have been offered in interviews I’ve conducted with some of the people involved. Virtually all the different stories of the breakup of the band revolve around three things: the low

wages Cooley paid his sidemen; the growing popularity of singers Williams, Rogers, and Deuce Spriggs; and the alcoholic rage Cooley would sometimes direct at his sidemen. Reflecting on the split, Larry DePaul says, “[The band] didn’t like the idea that Cooley drank so much. That was getting to everybody. He was a real alcoholic. And he would get pretty mad at some of the members of the band when he was drunk. He never got mad at me until I quit . . . I had a big tussle with Spade Cooley. Man, he blew his stack when he found out I was going to leave.” Deuce Spriggs left to form his own group. Joaquin Murphey left to join the Plainsmen. The rising star of Tex Williams and the success of “Shame on You” provided an out for the rest of the band when Cliffie Stone, who was then working A&R at Capitol Records, offered Williams his own contract with the label.

Stone remembered, “I called [Tex] one day, and I said, ‘Hey, you’ve got a great hit. Do you have a contract with Columbia?’ He said no. I said, ‘Do you have a contract with Spade Cooley?’ And he said no. I said, ‘How’d you like your own deal over here at Capitol?’ So he came over and we worked it out. When the band found out that Tex was leaving, about half of ‘em left Cooley and came with Tex.”

More than any difficulties with Cooley, it was DePaul’s loyalty to his longtime friends Smokey Rogers and Cactus Soldi that led him to join them in the Western Caravan. The band was formed as a four-person partnership between Williams, DePaul, Rogers, and Soldi, with each assuming different responsibilities. While Williams was the frontman, and Soldi the money man, DePaul continued to write

arrangements, maintain a library of music for the group, and rehearse the band. The gentlemanly Williams provided a welcome respite from Cooley and his volcanic temper, and it was under Williams that the band created its most interesting music. In addition to taking the core of musicians from Cooley’s band along with the return of Murphey and Spriggs, DePaul also held on to the Cooley books. Several of the group’s Capitol recordings, such as “Cowbell Polka” and “Steel Guitar Rag,” sound as though they’re played directly from arrangements DePaul made for the Cooley band. While the Cooley sound was sometimes saccharine and overly reserved, the Williams band had more of an edge, and provided a better forum both for DePaul’s talents as an arranger and for the outstanding stable of soloists the band had developed. This balance between well-conceived arrangements and outstanding improvisation is perhaps best displayed in the transcriptions the group made for the Armed Forces Radio Service, some of which have been reissued on the *Country Routes CD Tex Williams on the Air 1947-1949*. DePaul agrees that the band was far freer under Williams’s direction than they were under Cooley’s. He recalls, “When I was arranging with Cooley, he was always dictating to me what he wanted—how he wanted the fiddle to sound. He insisted on playing first violin, and he wasn’t capable of going above the third position. He was a good fiddler, but with most fiddlers that’s true. *Real fiddlers*—not violinists. He didn’t give me the freedom that I had with Tex Williams’s band.”

Lee Gillette, then the head A&R man at Capitol, also encouraged the band to branch out occasionally. They

built upon their earlier experiments, culminating in one of the most interesting recordings in the history of western swing. At Gillette's suggestion, DePaul arranged a reworking of Capitol labelmate Stan Kenton's "Artistry in Rhythm," entitled "Artistry in Western Swing." While west-

Despite their artistic success with tunes like "Artistry in Western Swing" and commercial success with their recording of "Smoke! Smoke! Smoke! (That Cigarette)" in 1947, westerns for Universal, and a TV show on KNBH, the group was difficult to keep together through the decline of public

opened the music store Valley Music in El Cajon, California, which is still run by Cactus's family. The Western Caravan played Friday and Saturday nights at the Bostonia and performed on Channel 8 for six and a half years. DePaul remembers, "Those were long shows. They started out to be

mandolin, and "a few others."

In his work with Spade Cooley's group and the Western Caravan, DePaul made an original contribution to country music by sculpting an ensemble sound which stood in stark contrast to any previous western group. His arrangements for such songs as "Shame On You," "Oklahoma Stomp," "Smoke! Smoke! Smoke!," and "Artistry in Western Swing" provided an ideal platform to showcase the talents of a gifted group of musicians, and shaped the sound of songs listeners have enjoyed for over a half-century. After a hectic career, DePaul retired to Spokane, Washington, where he still lives with his wife Beverley. He briefly returned to arranging and created four arrangements for the house band of the Western Swing Society in Seattle, and he was honored by the society as a "Pioneer in Western Swing" on August 15, 1993.



Spade Cooley (center) flanked by his barn dance boys and gal. DePaul is fourth from the left.

ern swing had been almost exclusively a dance music, and would remain primarily a dance music for the duration of its existence, "Artistry in Western Swing" was a complex work which brought elements of Kenton's "Progressive Jazz" into the often artistically conservative world of country music. Their effort even won praise from Kenton, who had previously called country music "a national disgrace." Steel guitarist Joaquin Murphey remembered that, "Stan Kenton called Tex and said, 'My god . . . this is fantastic. I didn't know a western band could do something like this.' It was quite a feather in Tex's hat."

dancing in the late '40s and early '50s. As Cliffie Stone observed, "It was a monstertype band. Much too expensive to book. They had too many fiddles, too many guitars." After a successful run at the Riverside Rancho and the Palace Barn, Williams broke up the group in 1951 at the insistence of his personal manager, Cliff Carling.

Smokey Rogers went down to San Diego to find work for the group. When Rogers secured a television show on KFMB, he called DePaul to "Get down there fast." The Western Caravan continued under Smokey's leadership, and they opened the Bostonia Ballroom in San Diego. Smokey, Cactus, and Pedro also

four hour shows. For five days a week. At the same time, for our music store, I maintained about a hundred and twenty accordion students."

At the end of the '50s, DePaul began attending Western University to work on a bachelor's degree in music and social science, while carrying as many as one hundred and twenty accordion, violin, and trombone students. He left the Western Caravan organization and went to work with the Cavaliers and stayed with the group for seventeen years. He also continued his teaching duties in San Diego area music stores, teaching violin, trombone, accordion, trumpet, flute, electric bass,

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