

Dance across Texas: Saving Texas dance halls, one two-step at a time

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They were the first building put up in a new community. They were the place to grab a cheap beer, catch up on town gossip and meet the gaze of your future spouse from across the room. They were where grandparents taught their grandchildren to dance. They were the birthplace of the Texas music sound.

And they are dying off.

Quickly.

At one point, Texas was home to around 1,000 dance halls. Now, along the winding rural roads, which once led to these landmarks all that remains is decayed and abandoned buildings.

In some cases, the buildings stand no more, torn down to make way for new buildings or burned to the ground from neglect.

For the ones that remain, many are no longer in use or have been remodeled to house a business or church.

All is not lost, however. A group of dedicated Texans have formed the nonprofit Texas Dance Hall Preservation organization, which is working to save these pieces of Texas history. Their solution is simple. To save a dance hall, people need to dance in them.

"We need to save these buildings because of what they bring to an area. They have so much character and so much warmth. They're too valuable to let go," Sharon Kleinecke, owner of Schroeder Dance Hall and a Texas Dance Hall Preservation board member said. "When a community was first organized, it was the first building they built. It was a place for everyone to meet. All that history, heritage and tradition is all well worth saving."

While the fairly new organization has been busy documenting the remaining dance halls and raising awareness about preservation, their biggest effort yet kicks off this month. The group is spearheading the "Dance Across Texas" event, which is attempting to raise funds to help restore old halls by holding dances at functioning dance halls, such as Schroeder, Kleinecke said.

"The two main causes of the destruction of these buildings is structural damage and trying to install modern electrical systems in them," she said, adding that many of the buildings were built several decades ago. "They're beautiful halls, but they fall into disrepair because no one is keeping up the maintenance."

Starting April 10 and lasting through April 30, dances will be held throughout the state, including at Schroeder, Kendalia Hall, Luckenbach Hall, Swiss Alp Hall and Club Westerner.

"One of the major things we want to do besides raise money is get people back in these halls," he added. "We want to get families back in there. For generations, dance halls were places where the whole family went and where people taught their kids how to dance. We want to keep that family tradition alive."

Dean said he's also passionate about saving the Texas musicians and their music that for years found a home in dance halls.

"Texas is a melting pot of many cultures, and that's one thing the halls have always embraced. That's what makes Texas music so great - the different ethnic styles. There's country-western, Tejano and even polka," Dean said. "It's important to bring people together to celebrate that."

The musicians signed up to play at the dance halls for "Dance Across Texas" were only too happy to participate, he added. Among those musicians are Bobby Flores, Geronimo Trevino, Amber Digny, Sunny & The Sunliners, Gary P. Nunn and Micky and the Motorcars.

For more information about "Dance Across Texas" or about Texas Dance Hall Preservation, go to www.texasdancehall.org