



The Legacy of Kenneth Threadgill

The musical life of Austin, Texas isn't the sole preserve of the legion of clubs that flourish and wither on 6th Street.

Kicking off at the Guadalupe River, if you drive north on Lamar Boulevard, you'll find Threadgill's Restaurant on the west side of North Lamar, at 6416 between the junctions with Koenig Lane and Justine Lane.

In 1933, following the prohibition era, Travis County voted to go wet. 24-year-old Kenneth Threadgill purchased Austin's first beer licence and opened a bar on the site of an abandoned filling station on what was then the northern extremity of the town. As well as barman, Threadgill was a sometime country singer, and his tavern soon became a favourite hangout for University of Texas students.

At the end of World War II, he organised shows where local folk and country musicians could get up and play on the bar's (still) cramped stage. Threadgill himself would regularly yodel and perform Jimmie Rodgers songs at these gatherings. (In the early 60s, he took a young and pre-famous Janis Joplin under his wing.)

After fire regulations closed down the establishment in 1973, Threadgill continued to perform in Austin clubs with his Velvet Cowpasture Band. September 12, 1981, his 72nd birthday, was proclaimed by the Texas Senate as "Kenneth Threadgill Day"; the following year, Armadillo Records released his debut album, *Silver Haired Daddy*. Threadgill passed away on March 20, 1987.

The Threadgill's site was purchased by Austinite Eddie Wilson toward the end of the 1970s. The famed sittin' n' pickin' sessions were re-established in the late 1980s with Jimmie Dale Gilmore taking the helm as compere/performer. In 1991, Champ Hood took over as compere, and retains that role to this day allied to a myriad other musical roles that call for his guitar, fiddle and vocal expertise.

To date, two live *Threadgill Supper Session* recordings have been released – the first was in 1991, the most recent, 1996. Content-wise, they blend folk and country music with the best work by Austin's countless singer/songwriters. Both albums are produced by Hood, David Heath and Roger Allen Polson. Roger talked with me about them.

"Champ and David, the bass player, have been playing Threadgill's for about seven years now, after Jimmie Gilmore brought them in as part of his band. We kept talking about doing a

recording. Of course, you always need money so David went to his dad who financed the original thing. His dad's name was Buddy, so we said, 'Well, let's call it Buddy Records.' What we wanted to do was record a night of music and put it out on cassette. It probably took a couple of months for the first recording to come together. We recorded it on September 4th, 1991 and we had the tape out before the Christmas season."

With regard to content of that first *Supper Session*, I enquired whether there had been any conscious song choices.

"To an extent. There was some organic stuff going on, but it was mostly the basic fare that they played all the time. We didn't do retakes over retakes to get things perfect. The first and second albums were recorded in the same manner in that they were mixed live to two track digital tape. There was editing and resequencing, but no remixing.

"We cut somewhere around forty songs on the first occasion and then it was a matter of finding the stuff that sounded the best and then balancing the artists – how many songs we wanted to use of each. We knew that we wanted to open with *Waiting For A Train* because that was our traditional starting song and still is. We wanted the other Jimmie Rodgers song that Champ does, *Travelin' Blues*. Beyond that, it was pretty much, 'We'll see what comes out and how it comes together.'"

The inspiration for the title of the albums harks back to a 1968 collaboration by the late Mike Bloomfield, Al Kooper and Stephen Stills. So *Super Session* became *Supper Session*.

"I'll have to claim that. When I was in my formative years, *Super Session* was on my turntable all the time. It formed a musical base for me. I don't know, I was just thinking about silly stuff and the title came to me. I made everybody else like it. Not that many people got the connection."

Guest performers on that first disc included Christine Albert, Sarah Elizabeth Campbell, Butch Hancock, Marcia Ball and a "back-for-one-night-only" appearance by Jimmie Dale Gilmore.

"Jimmie was still fairly freshly connected to Threadgill's and he really wanted to do it. He had just signed with Elektra and a minor amount of negotiation went on, but it was so cool when I finally talked to David Bither at the label and sent him a finished tape. He was thrilled with it, the spark and the whole feel of the recording.

"The other guests didn't have any major label affiliations. As it was, we had to leave off stuff. We wanted the recording to be truly representative of what was happening weekly at Threadgill's. Musically, and as far as the performers are concerned, Threadgill's has gone through a transition between the two releases."

The first *Threadgill's Supper Session*, finally gained CD release on the local independent Watermelon label.

(Watermelon Records was registered in 1989. Robert Earl Keen, originally a partner in the label, soon dropped out. The remaining partners were John Kunz, who owned the Waterloo Records store, and Heinz Geissler, a German music fan who emigrated to Austin in 1986.)

The recording session for the 1996 *Supper Session* album, subtitled *Second Helpings*, took place in October last year and the list of guest performers includes Tish Hinojosa, Sarah Elizabeth Campbell, Toni Price, Gary Primich, Mandy Mercier, Darcie Deaville and the late Walter Hyatt. Hyatt was one of the passengers on ValuJet flight 592 which crashed in the Florida Everglades earlier this year, killing everyone on board.

The original release date for *Second Helpings* slipped from late April to mid May. According to John Kunz of Watermelon Records, "We're in the awkward situation of deciding what's shameless promotion and what's the promotion that you should give to any record that is scheduled to come out."

America, it seems, is afflicted by invasive journalism, as his partner in Watermelon, Heinz Geissler, recalls. "When the news (of Hyatt's death) really broke, we had TV stations call us. Normally, nobody would really care about this record, except on that TV news level. Nine o'clock in the morning, the phone started ringing. 'We hear you have an album coming out. Can we come by to pick one up? Do you have any pictures?' One channel even went to Austin City Limits, got a little piece of Walter's performance on the show, showed our album cover, showed the promo picture – I mean the whole nine yards. This is sad. This is really sad."

Following Hyatt's death, a fundraising memorial concert was held at Austin's 38th Street Waterloo Ice House on May 19. Performers included Sarah Elizabeth Campbell, Champ and the Troubadours, Christine Albert, Jimmy LaFave, Butch Hancock, Tish Hinojosa and Sarah Hickman. Later that evening, a radio tribute took place where, in addition to the artists mentioned, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, the Texana Dames, Toni Price and Kimmie Rhodes lent their support.

There were other memorial concerts including one in late June in Nashville which featured Walter's longtime friend and supporter, Lyle Lovett, as well as his other musical associate in Uncle Walt's Band, Champ Hood.

Uncle Walt's Band came together in South Carolina at the outset of the 1970s. They recorded and split up on a number of occasions through that decade and the early part of the next, finally disbanding in 1983. Hyatt went on to release two solo albums, the Lyle Lovett-produced *King Tears* (1990) for MCA and *Music Town* (1993) for Sugar Hill.

In 1991, the latter label simultaneously reissued the four independently released Uncle Walt albums as double sets on cassette and CD. *The Girl On The Sunny Shore* teamed their South Carolina-recorded debut album, initially titled *Blame It On The Bossa Nova* and later *Uncle Walt's Band* (1974), with most of 6-26-79 (1988) which was cut in Austin on the date stated. *An American In Texas Revisited* combined *An American In Texas* (1980) and *Uncle Walt's Band Recorded Live* (1982) with one remaining cut from 6-26-79 (1988).

Walter and Champ appeared at the 1992 Kerrville Folk Festival as a duo, while the third member of the band, David Ball, has found fame (and fortune) in Nashville.

Champ Hood reflected, "I bought my first instrument, a baritone ukelele, from Walter when I was eleven years old. He was three years older than me, and we lived in the same neighbourhood in Spartanburg, South Carolina. In High School, I had a rock'n'roll band, while Walter had a folk group like the Christy Minstrels.

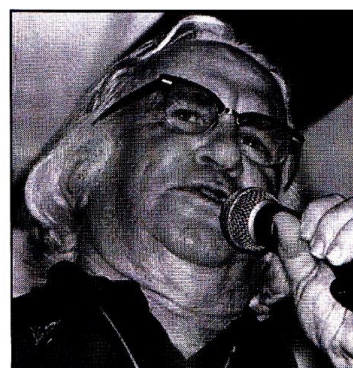
"When I started hanging out with Walter, I was 17. Then David Ball joined us. We spent a year in Nashville and really came

together as a band. Willis Alan Ramsey, who we'd met there, asked us to come to Austin and we helped him build Hound Dog Sound.

"We eventually cut four albums after breaking up a number of times. Jimmie (Dale Gilmore) was initially doing a solo spot at Threadgill's and he asked me to come and guest with him a few times. Then I did a tour with him where I was in the band. He decided he liked that band, so it became a band thing at Threadgill's.

"As time passed, Jimmie had me singing more and more, integrating me into that Threadgill's thing. When Jimmie packed up, there was some transition with different performers headlining, and then Roger realised that week to week there was no common theme. He asked me to come down to give it that common thread.

"Finally, we decided to do it like Jimmie had done it, with a band. I asked Marvin Dykhuys, from Tish's band, to be my partner in crime. There was also David Heath and Ron Erwin. Steve Williams went off with Marcia Ball. Some of those nights with Jimmie were so magical to me that I thought it needed to be recorded. Roger and I started talking about it one night. The first recording kind of established what the new Troubadours (Champ's



Kenneth Threadgill:
patriarch of the
Austin music scene

band) eventually came to be.

"The thing that has kept me doing it is that it truly is different every week. You never know who is going to show up. Obviously, we're not rehearsed; we just get together and try to have some fun playing music.

"Walter always invited me to be on his records, and it was partly returning the favour with *Second Helpings*. Walter had done Threadgill's just about every time he came to Austin. There was stuff that we did together that I knew we would never record in a studio; I just wanted to have it on tape."

The unofficial record release party for *Second Helpings* took place at Threadgill's on May 22, 1996. Sarah Elizabeth Campbell, Darcie Deaville, Toni Price, Mandy Mercier, Butch Hancock, Erica Wheeler, Bill & Bonnie Hearne and Jim Rooney all sang during the evening. The Troubadours included Champ, David Heath and Marvin Dykhuys. Suffice to say, considering the recent tragic event, it was a magical evening's music, marked by optimism but tinged with respect and a little sadness.

I asked Champ if he wanted to offer any final words regarding Walter. "Everything you say kind of sounds trite. I would just say that he was a fine example of a human being and it's a terrible loss. To the world in general, not just to his closest friends. I'm going to miss him and I think a lot of other people are, too."

Finally, I asked Roger what he saw as the future of Threadgill's. "We already have a concept for a third album, but we'll see what happens. There's about ten good cuts from the first session and more from the new one. The new album is a snapshot of Threadgill's currently. That's the best thing about Threadgill's – it's a group of friends, new and old. For me, it's a significant part of the Austin spirit."

P.S. Anyone wishing to make a donation to Walter Hyatt's memorial fund can address it to Second Presbyterian Church, c/o Hyatt Family Fund, 3511 Belmont Boulevard, Nashville, TN 37215, USA. ■