

Sept. 19, 1999--

TULSA, Okla.--- Country legend Merle Haggard looks down from the stage at Cain's Ballroom, a hop, skip and a jump from Tulsa's skid row. A capacity crowd of 1,000 people has packed the rustic dance hall on a hot September night.

The room lacks air conditioning. Instead, a soft breeze is stirred by tall industrial fans whose silver blades spin around like old Haggard 45s. Warm beads of condensation trickle down Budweiser tall-boys.

A sweaty Haggard says, "This is one of the last few honky-tonks in the world." He then launches into Bob Wills' 1950 hit "Faded Love," dueting with his ex-wife and background singer Bonnie Owens (also ex-wife of country star Buck Owens). The place goes up for grabs.

Everyone is up for raisin' Cain.

This year marks the 75th anniversary of Cain's Ballroom, 423 N. Main St. near Old Route 66. Haggard and his band are part of the Dust Bowl dance hall's anniversary concert series. Haggard - who cites Wills as a major influence - also is the first living inductee into the Cain's Ballroom Walk of Fame on the sidewalk outside the ballroom. (Wills was first, but he died in 1975.)

Built from natural limestone, Cain's was the home of Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys, who broadcast live from the ballroom from 1934 to the early 1960s on KVOO Radio. Good call. Wills was from Limestone County, Texas.

Western swing music evolved out of this Oklahoma state landmark because Madison W. Cain opened the room in 1933 as Cain's Dancing Academy. On-the-spot teachers would give lessons in all dance forms - foxtrot and waltz as well as Texas two-step.

The springloaded curly maple dance floor is the last one left in America. It is mounted on sets of Dodge truck springs.

The building was constructed in 1924 as an auto garage. In the late 1920s, original owner Tate Brady turned the building into the Louvre Ballroom, a dime-a-dance hall, or "taxi dance" ballroom. The original ticket booth is still standing, taking on all-comers.

Locals know Cain's as the connection for bootleg whiskey. Prohibition wasn't repealed in Oklahoma until 1957, and the phone booth at Cain's was filled to the brim with business cards of bootleggers willing to meet clients in the alley. When overserved patrons got too rowdy, Wills would tap the microphone with the bow of

his fiddle and launch into a church hymn.

Most of country music's essential artists have appeared at Cain's, including Hank Williams, Patsy Cline, Spade Cooley, Roy Rogers, Ernest Tubb and Hank Thompson. Their 3-by-4-foot color-tinted photographs surround the dance floor.

Grammy-winning Asleep at the Wheel vocalist Ray Benson has been known to go down the rows and photos and call out dance tunes that correspond with the picture of each legend. Asleep at the Wheel will play Western swing and traditional country Oct. 16 at Cain's. Road trip.

A red neon star flickers from the ceiling over the center of the dance floor, which is filled with folding chairs and tables for the Haggard concert. About half of the audience consists of rugged Tulsa old-timers, who go back to the wildcat 1920s when everyone traveled to Tulsa to strike oil. Today there are only nine oil companies headquartered in town. Most companies left Tulsa for more fertile ground in Houston and Dallas.

Tulsa was built on the working class ethic of oil barons Waite Phillips (Phillips 66), J. Paul Getty and William G. Skelly. After working in the oil fields all day, at night Cain's was a popular place to play.

Rosetta Wills, 59 is Bob Wills' oldest daughter. Last year she wrote "The King of Western Swing: Bob Wills Remembered.". In a phone conversation from her home in Austin, Texas, Wills says, "When I go to autograph signings, everyone has a story about Cain's. The most popular one is how they met their wives or husbands there. People remember their parents or grandparents going and taking their kids. They used to have benches that lined the walls. They remember sleeping on the benches while everyone danced.

"Dad played there in the early 1960s, and I used to go there a lot when I was in my 20s, which was great. Not all his children were able to do that. They didn't live there, or they were younger. That room is like a museum."

In the 1970s and 1980s Cain's owner Larry Shaeffer expanded Cain's mystique by featuring non-country acts like Elvis Costello, Patti Smith, Muddy Waters and the Sex Pistols. Rock n' Roll Hall of Famers Jerry Lee Lewis and Little Richard have appeared at Cain's this year as part of the 75th anniversary celebration.

"Non-country artists have complete reverence for this place," Shaeffer says before the Haggard concert. "Beck (Hansen) came into this building when the band loaded in at 11 a.m. Usually, the artists go back to the hotel and sleep. Beck stayed here all day. He walked around. He said he wanted to hear stories."

Shaeffer has owned Cain's since 1976. The Tulsa native also uses the ballroom as headquarters for his Little Wing Productions, which books rock, jazz and

contemporary Christian concerts in the Tulsa area. During Bob Wills' heyday, Cain's was owned by the Texas Playboys manager O. W. Mayo, which is why most of the portraits are autographed to Mayo. He installed the portraits between 1944 and 1950.

Marie Myers, an 83-year-old widow from nearby Muskogee (as in Haggard's 1969 hit "Okie From Muskogee") who met her husband at a Bob Wills dance, bought the ballroom from Mayo in 1972 but failed to make Cain's click. Shaeffer purchased Cain's from Myers.

Shaeffer's office is a cornucopia of country music lore, ranging from original Ernest Tubb movie posters to love letters from Bob Wills' female fans he found stuck in a wall during a remodeling project. But a stunning highlight is a red vinyl couch - emblazoned with the Cain's logo - that Hank Williams slept on in October 1952 when he was too drunk to play his second show.

"He got someone to run beer to him all day," says Shaeffer, who was handed down the story from Mayo. "So he's toasted. Both shows were sold out. He got through the first show, although it took two people to hold him up. Hank laid down on the couch between shows, and they couldn't wake him up. He was mixing morphine (for a bad back) with liquor. This was 10 weeks before he died."

Mayo, who died in 1994 at age 93, told Shaeffer he didn't know what to do. He finally came clean and told the audience that Hank was too drunk to perform and that his backing band, the Drifting Cowboys, would play without him. Money would be refunded as fans left Cain's.

"Well, someone opened the door to the office and a line formed," Shaeffer says. "People filed past (a blank Hank) like a funeral viewing. The band played on, and not one person asked for their money back."

It's impossible to describe how much Cain's means to a tried and true country traditionalist like Haggard. In 1973 in Dallas, Haggard and his band played on Wills' final recording session at Wills' request.

"I'll tell you how much it means," Shaeffer says. "In the early 1980s I booked Merle into Knoxville, Tenn., on a Friday and Asheville, N.C., on a Saturday. Merle always does a medley of Bob Wills songs, and the band used to pass around a bottle of whiskey during that.

"At the Asheville sound check, the building manager says, 'Tell that S.O.B. that if he drinks on my stage he's going to jail.' I sugarcoat it and tell Merle, 'The building director says there's a city ordinance that if you drink in public, you'll get arrested, so please don't.' And Merle says, 'Get me a bottle of Jack Daniel's, I'm going to drink all night!' The show starts and sure enough, he gets arrested."

Shaeffer sprung Haggard out of jail and around 5 a.m. the promoter and the problem repaired to a Denny's across the North Carolina-Tennessee state line. Shaeffer was wearing a Cain's Ballroom softball jersey.

"Merle says, 'Hey, I got a million Cain's stories,' and then he says, 'In a week we end our tour in Ft. Worth. The next day I'm going to come to Tulsa, take my band to Johnnie Lee Wills' (Bob's brother) Western Store, get them all white shirts, string ties and Stetson hats, and we're going to come to Cain's and do a radio broadcast."

Haggard was not paid for the gig, and Shaeffer did not charge admission. According to Shaeffer, Haggard walked on stage and said, "I'm going to kick the - - - of the first S.O.B. that asks me to play a Merle Haggard song." Haggard and the Strangers proceeded to do Bob Wills music the rest of the night.

But of all the acts Shaeffer has brought into Cain's, the punk-rock Sex Pistols provide everlasting memories. The Sex Pistols played Cain's on Jan. 11, 1978.

"They were young kids drinking hot Heineken beer all day long," says Shaeffer, 51, as he leans toward the late Sid Vicious' autograph on the office wall. "The Sex Pistols played seven shows in America. Number six was here. They played the night before at Dewey Groom's Longhorn Ballroom in Dallas. I've got a picture of their marquee. It says: 'TONIGHT: THE SEX PISTOLS, TOMORROW: MERLE HAGGARD.' (Pistols manager) Malcolm McLaren was very bright.

"When the Pistols came to America, he knew he could do New York and Chicago. He elected to take a swing through the South because there would be trouble. And with trouble came publicity. The Pistols were raucous, but they didn't utter one bit of profanity onstage. It was pure, arrogant, aggressive rock 'n' roll. I'd never heard that before. They showed up about 10 a.m. and lingered around all day. Johnny Rotten and Sid Vicious were screaming at each other and getting drunker and drunker. My little anemic secretary finally threw (them) out of the ballroom."

Shaeffer is interrupted by one of his employees. There's a problem afoot in the dance hall. It seems that Haggard's fans drank all the beer. And the headliner has yet to hit the stage. "Order cans or bottles, whatever you can get quicker," Shaeffer says with an Oklahoma calm in his voice. "We only lose money when we run out." The help shuffles away.

He smiles.

"If there's a message that I would send you, it's that Bob and the Texas Playboys were a religion to blue collar people," Shaeffer says. "When you were from Oklahoma and you traveled abroad, you didn't say, 'I know Will Rogers.' You'd say, 'I know Bob Wills.'" That summed it up."

And to know Bob Wills, you must know Cain's Ballroom.

