



# Home of the **COWBOY** TROUBADOURS

As the Western Jubilee Recording Company celebrates its 15th anniversary, founder Scott O'Malley and his crew are as committed as ever to furthering American roots music.

*By Tom Wilmes*

**AT THE SLEEPY END** of East Cucharras Street in downtown Colorado Springs, Colo., there's a freight warehouse built in 1887, with an adjoining office fronted by a wooden boardwalk and hitching post. This anachronistic compound by the old Santa Fe railroad tracks, tucked between a concrete mix plant and a youth center, happens to be the worst kept secret in Western music.

It stays quiet here most days. A promoter might drop by to discuss details of an upcoming show, or an artist will stop in for a visit, but mostly it's just the owner, Scott O'Malley, and his small staff working the phones to iron out booking arrangements for artists on the Scott O'Malley and Associates talent agency roster or fielding calls for the Western Jubilee Recording Company.

On show days, however, cars, campers, and pick-up trucks pack the street, and those in the know make their way around back to the Western Jubilee Warehouse entrance. Concerts here are intimate, word-of-mouth affairs that feel like living-room performances, if your living room looked like a cross between a railroad museum, cowboy hall-of-fame, and a swap meet.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY JOY KELLEY

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COWBOY POET WADDIE MITCHELL, DON EDWARDS, AND THE SONS OF THE SAN JOAQUIN (LON, JACK, AND JOE HANNAH)



pick moments that present an artist at his most accessible and unadorned, makes for warm and authentic sounding recordings that have resulted in eight Western Heritage Awards and two Grammy nominations. O'Malley may have forgone more mainstream success by focusing on Western music, conjectures Messenger, but it's about more than numbers: "He took a risk, and has shown that Western Jubilee is wholly dedicated to the people, stories, and places that this music is all about," he says. "And that commitment is deep and honest."

**SCOTT O'MALLEY**, who turns 65 in August, is an analog guy in a digital world. His office bookshelves are stuffed with thick binders that hold decades' worth of contracts and booking arrangements. O'Malley's sons, Brendan and Tyler, work in the family business and place email print outs that need his attention into a wooden inbox obscured by stacks of paper on his desk. O'Malley peers over tiny reading glasses and smiles as he reads one sent by a fan recounting a story about a 20-year-old performer who cited old-time guitar great Norman Blake as one of his heroes at a folk festival in Australia. The fan hopes the story will, "help alleviate some fears about this beautiful music disappearing."

Raised on his family's farm near Richmond, Indiana, O'Malley toured as a professional musician for years before settling in Colorado, where he met his wife, Kathie. In 1982, he started his own booking agency, signing artists such as Blake and classic rock, party band Flash Cadillac. Blake and O'Malley's friendship goes back to the mid-1970s, when they were both with the same booking agency. In 2002, Blake scored a Grammy win and multi-platinum-selling status for his contributions to the *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* movie soundtrack.

O'Malley's entrée into cowboy music dates to 1993 and a meeting arranged by long-time friend William Matthews. A renowned watercolor artist who painted album art for the now-defunct Warner Western music label out of Nashville, Matthews knew that Waddie Mitchell, Don Edwards, and the Sons of the San Joaquin had recently left the label and were looking for new representation. He suggested that the cowboys give O'Malley a call, who ended up flying out to a performance in Santa Rosa, California, for a meeting.

"Nashville was big business, and there were people there who were very good at their specific jobs moving and shaking things," says Waddie Mitchell. "But with Scott, I felt like we were talking to one of our own." As conversations progressed, the cowboys appreciated O'Malley's lack of pre-conceived notions. Mitchell didn't want a contract, for instance, and he remembers O'Malley saying: "I just want you to look me in the eye. I'll look you in the eye, we'll say certain

things, and then shake hands on it."

"We shook hands, and I've never so much as raised an eyebrow since," Mitchell explains about the management arrangement and the Western Jubilee recordings. "Nashville would have never released a lot of this stuff we put out."

Don Edwards was happy to sign with O'Malley, too. "We had stereotypical-type agents in Nashville who didn't get what we were doing at all," he says. "They were used to dealing with big, mainstream country acts, but our audience is more grassroots. We'd always just sold our records out of the back of a pick-up truck, you know?"

O'Malley says with a wry grin: "I hated agents all



LEFT: SCOTT O'MALLEY POSES WITH THE "QUIET PLEASE" SIGN, A MAIN-STAY AT THE WESTERN JUBILEE WAREHOUSE. BELOW: THE WESTERN JUBILEE WAREHOUSE AND OFFICES IN COLORADO SPRINGS, COLO.



Many of Western music's modern masters—including Don Edwards, the Sons of the San Joaquin, Waddie Mitchell, Wylie and the Wild West, Michael Martin Murphey, and Rich O'Brien—have performed here. The venue's 111 well-worn seats were salvaged from an old movie theater (three church pews provide extra seating), and the room is packed floor to rafters with antique instruments, vintage cowboy hats, tin signs, bric-a-brac, knickknacks, and other treasures. The little stage is constructed of oversized wooden drawers and backed by a curtain stitched together from mismatched quilts. O'Malley jokes that he's a "diseased over-collector," but the décor contributes to the ambient magic that has helped create some of the most unique performances and recordings in all of Western music.

Western is a niche genre more akin to folk and bluegrass than it is to contemporary country. Few are in it to get rich and the musicians who do make a living at it are largely self-supported and rely on grassroots marketing. Jon Messenger, president of the Western Music Association, puts that number at less than 500 musicians. There are no organized efforts, like the big PR machines in Nashville, to promote the music on a national level nor are there glitzy televised award shows to introduce musicians to new audiences *en masse*. Rather, successful careers are built one performance at a time and are measured in decades,

not in weeks spent atop the charts. For its part, the Western music audience is loyal, which helps make the genre largely immune to the hot-and-cold whims of mainstream culture.

"We have an obligation to a higher code of ethics in Western music," says Messenger. "Because we're responsible for conveying a sense of legacy." And that commitment to legacy pervades everything that O'Malley and his crew produces, which fans clearly respond to. Don Edwards, the first to perform here when the recording company was founded in 1996, calls Western Jubilee the "major little record label for this kind of music."

"I've always told my guys 'When we're gone, my kids are going to send your kids royalty checks,'" says O'Malley, whose curator mentality also extends to his work. "That's the long-term plan of all this. Music is forever, and it feels important to not just capture it but to preserve it."

The room's relaxed ambience, unique acoustics, and O'Malley's ability to cherry-

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PHOTOS BY DONALD KALLIUS (TOP); TOM WILMES

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TOP AND INSET: THE ECLECTIC DECOR IN THE WESTERN JUBILEE WAREHOUSE HELPS INSPIRE MUSICIANS AND AUDIENCES ALIKE.



SOUND ENGINEER BUTCH HAUSE USES A MIX OF NEW AND OLDER TECHNOLOGY TO CAPTURE THE UNIQUE SOUND ON WAREHOUSE RECORDINGS.

those years when I was playing, and now I am one... With Western Jubilee, we pretty much decided that we'd do everything exactly the opposite of the mainstream." No hype, no pandering.

"I always tell my artists the truth, whether it's good news or bad news. I'm not going to stretch it either way," he says. "My job, working with these stars, is to amplify their careers... This is a niche thing that we do, but it's an important niche. It's more than just cowboy music and poems, it's all that goes with the lifestyle and the Western values."

Michael Martin Murphey recorded *Lone Cowboy*, the only solo album of his long career, before a live audience in the Western Jubilee Warehouse. "If it hadn't been for Scott O'Malley, a lot of cowboy music and a lot of cowboy poetry would have been lost in this world," says Murphey. "He's done more for the careers of those kinds of people than any other man in America."

Ranger Doug, of cowboy quartet Riders in the Sky, echoes the sentiment: "He's a real pioneer and torchbearer in keeping Western music alive through difficult times. A number of artists and thousands of fans are extremely grateful to him for the work that he's done."

**IF O'MALLEY** is the brains behind Western Jubilee and the artists are the heart, sound engineer Butch Hause is the ear. He's responsible for that distinctive, un-produced sound—a less-is-more approach that captures the essence of the music without getting in its way.

"We keep it cowboy simple," says Hause, who uses the same setup for recording sessions and live performances.

Hause worked closely with cowboy poet Baxter Black for years and has recorded and mixed nearly every performance in the Warehouse. He's a master at capturing the spontaneous interplay of musicians as they perform together in real time and avoids recording each track separately to mix it all together later with overdubs and layers of production. Hause's methods let the unadorned, relaxed nature of the sessions shine through. It's not an exaggeration to say that the only difference between one of Western Jubilee's studio recordings and a live recording is the applause between songs.

The Warehouse is "one of those special places with an old and open sound that compliments the guys we work with so well and gives a continuity to our recordings that a lot of labels can't achieve," says Hause. "I've collected a lot of older gear over the years—mics, pre-amps, compressors, and equalizers. These help shape the sound, but it's mainly that room. Honestly, I could bring in an old cassette deck and a Radio Shack microphone and capture the sound of that room."

O'Malley explains: "When you go into a regular studio, you put on headsets and look through a glass booth. Then you slick it, gloss it, layer it, shine it, and stack it. We just try and capture the magic that [the artists] already have and not try and create it."

The artists also appreciate the room's unique acoustics and intimacy and often respond in kind. Hause recalls the unique vibe of a recent two-night stand by

Michael Martin Murphey that forms the basis of his forthcoming solo release (his second album in the *Lone Cowboy* vein): "Murphey is telling stories about how these songs came to be written and what he was doing at the time, and suddenly he becomes a different persona to that audience. They're actually getting to meet the guy. I tell the artists, 'Just give me your heart, and we'll take care of the rest.'"

While so much of modern country music sounds slick, disposable, and of the moment, Western music tends to remain unembellished. The tunes are simple, often acoustic, and rooted in colorful imagery that speaks to the heart of the Western experience.

"It's these ancient melodies from Ireland and Scotland that came to America and, as they floated West the lyrics changed, and they were singing about coyotes instead of clipper ships," says O'Malley. In other words, this historic genre of music is a living, changing art form, and its survival depends on artists and companies that nurture tradition and help it flourish.

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"I've always figured that some day, when we're all gone, somebody is going to rediscover this old music that was recorded in this old building in Colorado Springs down by the railroad tracks. You know, by like John Lomax XIX or something," he says, referencing the early 20th-century musicologist and collector of cowboy songs. "This music's going to disappear if someone doesn't latch on to it and keep it living on. Norman [Blake] has done that for years, and so has Don [Edwards], preserving this great old stuff. Some of it, no one's really sure who wrote it, they just learned it from this guy, who learned it from that guy and so on."

For O'Malley, one of the biggest personal rewards of starting Western Jubilee was the opportunity to connect with childhood heroes like Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, and Dale Evans before they passed. In fact, Don Edwards' performance at Autry's 90th-birthday celebration was released by Western Jubilee as *My Hero Gene Autry*, and O'Malley arranged a special visit with Rogers and the Sons of the San Joaquin that is included on their *Live from the Western Jubilee Warehouse* DVD.

"And now I look around, and my guys are carrying the torch," says O'Malley. "If they're not done singing it, then we shouldn't be done recording it. It's not like there's an age limit to quality." 🌟



PERFORMANCES AT THE WESTERN JUBILEE WAREHOUSE ARE ANNOUNCED VIA AN EXCLUSIVE MAILING LIST AND USUALLY SELL OUT QUICKLY.

## Essential listening

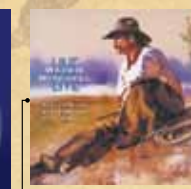
Western Jubilee (800-707-2353, [westernjubilee.com](http://westernjubilee.com)) has put out 42 albums in 15 years. Here are some of our favorites.



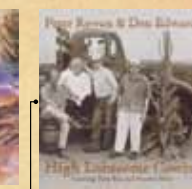
**Lone Cowboy,** Michael Martin Murphey  
The only solo album of his career, *Lone Cowboy* explores Murphey's singer/songwriter roots in its purest form.



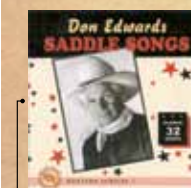
**Be Ready Boys,** Norman Blake and Rich O'Brien  
Blake, a flatpicking guitar legend, and O'Brien, a member of the Western Music Association's Hall of Fame, convene in a master class that covers old-time ballads, Western swing, and beyond.



**Waddie Live,** Waddie Mitchell  
Accompanied by Rich O'Brien and Norman Blake and with a guest appearance from Don Edwards, cowboy poet Waddie is in his element performing for a live audience.



**High Lonesome Cowboy,** Peter Rowan and Don Edwards  
This Grammy-nominated recording is a virtuoso summit of top-notch musicians exploring the intersections of country, bluegrass, and cowboy music.



**Saddle Songs/Last of the Troubadours,** Don Edwards  
These two, double-disc albums represent a collection of Edwards' favorite and obscure songs from the cowboy tradition.



**Live from the Western Jubilee Warehouse,** Sons of the San Joaquin  
Cowboy music in three-part harmony is made even better by an accompanying concert DVD.



**A Western Jubilee: Songs and Stories of the American West**  
This sampler recording of songs and poetry recorded from the Western Jubilee stage includes many highlights plucked from the label's vast archives.



**Seasons, Roads & Faces,** Rich O'Brien  
Probably the biggest name in Western music that most people have never heard of, O'Brien's masterfully understated guitar work is highlighted on this album.

► For a video of a Western Jubilee Warehouse performance, visit [AmericanCowboy.com](http://AmericanCowboy.com).