

SUGARHILL RECORDING STUDIOS

The Story of a House

JUST SOUTH OF OLD SPANISH TRAIL AND WEST OF WAYSIDE, IN A WORKING-class enclave that backs up to the railroad yard and cargo terminal at Produce Row, stands a two-story box of a building at 5626 Brock Street. Situated on a large lot with tall trees, it has a monotone sheet-metal façade. From the street it appears to have no windows, just a blank face. On the main west side is a fenced and gated parking area. Along the wall within that spacious enclosure, a dark awning over a solid door signifies the main entrance. The building looks nothing like the neighboring houses (mostly small, sagging, wood-frame residences over a half-century old). If you stand far enough back in the parking area and survey the upper part of the structure, you can glimpse the apex of an off-center roofline. That's the only clue that this sprawling, postmodern-industrial edifice was actually constructed around an older architectural core that was once a family home.

That home, like the family who lived there, is unknown to most Houstonians, despite its housing the oldest continually operated recording studio in the nation outside of New York or Chicago. An independent facility founded locally in 1941 and moved to this location around 1950, it first gained fame under the Gold Star name, but has been known since the early 1970s as SugarHill Studios. In 70 years of operation, an astonishing range of musicians—Lightnin' Hopkins, Willie Nelson, the Big Bopper, Clifton Chenier, Lucinda Williams, Maxie Granados, and Beyoncé Knowles, to name a few—has recorded there.

MEET THE PATRIARCH

William Russell ("Bill") Quinn (1904-1976), a Massachusetts native and self-trained public address system soundman for a traveling carnival company, became a Houstonian by accident. In 1939 a broken car axle stranded him and his

wife here as they drove toward the carnival troupe's winter home in Florida. In need of funds, the crafty Quinn took advantage of Houston's no-zoning municipal policy on land use and posted a "Radio Repair" sign in the front window of the place where they were staying until the car was drivable again, a house belonging to one of his wife's relatives. Soon he began to draw customers and make money, one fix-it job at a time. Within a few weeks, he had earned so much cash that he chose to abandon the carny life and settle permanently in southeast Houston.

A few months later, Quinn rented space in an old storefront at 3104 Telephone Road and opened his one-man venture, Quinn Radio Service. Business was good, for in Houston (and elsewhere) in 1940, radios were hugely popular, both the technological focal point of most homes and a primary source of entertainment and news. And those old-style tube radios often required adjustments or repairs, services that Quinn was adept at performing.

Quinn's knowledge of the mechanics of electronic sound transmission and reproduction soon expanded. Essentially a tinkerer, he began to learn more about recording as he dismantled and repaired various newfangled devices, including phonographs and early home disk recorders, brought in by customers. The mystery of how these machines could capture and play back sound must have fascinated the man. Likely driven more by simple curiosity than by any visionary entrepreneurship, he continued to experiment and observe the results.

After much trial and error, Quinn eventually figured out how to make primitive recordings entirely on his own—a revolutionary breakthrough in Texas at the time. To do so, he had to utilize recycled materials and makeshift devices. For example, he located and



BY ROGER WOOD

OPPOSITE: Andy Bradley, SugarHill's Chief Engineer for the past 27 years.

purchased scrapped pressing equipment from up north, then renovated it. He also amassed scratched or damaged records from various sources, broke them into little pieces, pulverized them in a coffee-grinder, and melted the remnants to form the raw "biscuit dough" material necessary for producing copy disks from an acetate master.

In 1941, having decoded the fundamental secrets of recording and reproducing sound, Quinn refocused his business plan, changing the company name to Quinn Recording. It was a daring venture, given that deep knowledge of recording technology was then still a closely held secret in an industry controlled by five major companies based in Chicago and New York. Moreover, shellac—one of the essential raw materials for making records at that time—was largely unavailable for civilian use during World War II, a shortage that alone almost shut down the recording industry nationwide. Yet the studio company that Quinn founded not only survived, but remains in business in Houston today, despite an eventual relocation and various changes in ownership.

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Though at first it mainly produced radio advertisements or jingles, Quinn's solo enterprise by 1944 had expanded to encompass not only recording, but also the mastering, pressing, and distributing of 78 RPM disks. His first few productions were for his own short-lived Gulf Records label, which issued only four records (three by white country singers and another by an African-American blues ensemble).

In 1946 Quinn closed the experimental Gulf Records enterprise and launched his Gold Star Records label. Its soon-abandoned slogan, "King of the Hillbillies," indicated that he initially expected to focus squarely on traditional country music. Yet over the next four years, Gold Star recorded a wide range of artists performing in a dazzling variety of ethnic styles. There was plenty of country music, to be sure, but also Cajun music, western swing, gospel, German polkas, Tejano conjunto, and lots of blues, both the primal solo guitar style and the fully orchestrated version that would soon give way to R&B.

From today's perspective, the Gold Star imprint represents some of the most significant documentation of regional musical styles in Texas at the time. But Quinn's motivation was not archival in nature: he was simply looking to record material for which there might be demand on regional jukeboxes. Perhaps, as a Massachusetts-born outsider, Quinn also lacked some of the ingrained prejudices that were then common among white men in the South, making it easier for him to cross certain cultural boundaries. Whatever the case, Quinn's self-built studio, like the one that would replace it at the turn of the decade, embraced a no-zoning ethos in direct reflection of his adopted city, a burgeoning metropolis of people from myriad communities. To local musicians, Quinn in effect offered an open mic.

Gold Star Records produced four national hits in the late 1940s, all by performers from minority groups. The first featured the fiddler and singer Harry Choates, a native of Vermilion Parish in southwest Louisiana. Growing up on the Texas side of the Sabine River in Port Arthur, Choates had absorbed the Cajun music traditions that inspired his spirited 1946 Gold Star recording of the classic waltz "Jole Blon," sung entirely in French patois. It became an unlikely nationwide phenomenon, cresting twice at the number four position on Billboard's Most Played Juke Box Folk Records list in early

1947. The following year Gold Star scored two more top-ten Billboard rankings, first with "T-Model Blues" by the iconic African-American guitarist and singer Lightnin' Hopkins, a native of the southeast Texas cotton country who had settled in Houston's Third Ward. Then Lil' Son Jackson, who had briefly migrated to Houston from Dallas, followed with "Freedom Train Blues." Like Hopkins, Jackson performed solo, his lone voice accompanied only by his plaintive licks on guitar. His lyrics lamented the loss of a woman who "rode that freedom train" north, escaping the South in search of a better life—a situation that spoke to the collective experience or aspirations of many African-Americans. One year later Hopkins again charted for Gold Star, this time at number 13, with the sharecropper's blues "Tim Moore's Farm," which bitterly references an actual person and place in rural Grimes County, northwest of Houston. Despite the odds against his

independent venture, Quinn's company had climbed high on the Billboard charts, then generally the domain of a few major labels, by highlighting music from the social underclass of the region.

Although Quinn was making some money on his investment, his lack of experience with the tax codes governing the national distribution of his product led to problems. In 1950, besieged by IRS troubles, Quinn chose to terminate his Gold Star Records label and close the Telephone Road business site. Disillusioned by the confusing responsibilities of owning a record company, Quinn elected to concentrate on contracting his self-taught engineering services to other producers. To do so, he first needed to establish affordable studio space in which he could install his recording equipment.

The self-reliant Quinn quickly devised a solution. Again taking advantage of Houston's no-zoning policy, he moved his collection of gear into the ground floor of the nearby two-story home he owned on Brock Street. He then remodeled the family living room and dining room area into a performance space and engineering control room, tacking empty egg cartons onto the walls to baffle the sound. To christen his self-designed workplace, he returned to the Gold Star name, but in a different context. Thus, the business previously known as Quinn Recording Company, home of the now defunct Gold Star Records label, reemerged as an unaffiliated studio-for-hire under the moniker of Gold Star Studio, conveniently located just downstairs from where its founder resided with his wife and son.

The new home-based business represented a second chance for Quinn in the still nascent independent recording industry, and the new strategy better suited his particular skills. Free of the burdens of recruiting, managing, and promoting the artistic talent, as well as financing and accounting for the recording, manufacturing, and distribution of the end products, Quinn could now concentrate solely on his craft—the technology of recording and reproducing sound. This revised business plan flourished, and the Quinn family got used to having a professional recording studio right downstairs next to their kitchen.

TOUR THE STUDIO

In the foyer and the reception room at SugarHill Studios, glass-cased walls

display Gold Record Awards, album and CD covers, publicity photos, posters, clippings from periodicals, and other memorabilia of a few of the musicians who have recorded there. Some of them did so just a few steps away, down the hall and to the left, in Studio B, a 12-by-28-foot room, walls covered with wood paneling and sound baffles, three sound-isolation booths on one end and the engineer's control room on the other. A gold-colored star in the floor tiles, about six feet across, marks the center point where musicians have gathered to perform for almost fifty years. Studio B was designed by the famous Nashville-based producer, engineer, and songwriter Cowboy Jack Clement as part of a major 1964 expansion, which included a new entrance area and hallway, and numerous offices and storage space at the southern end of the building.

To get to the older part of this convoluted studio complex, just return to the hall and proceed to its northern terminus in the coffee lounge. Pass through the lounge and take the next short hall, then veer to the left into the big control room, a high-tech chamber full of large soundboard desks and other furniture crowded with computer screens, speakers, and gear. This was once Quinn's front lawn.

To your right, the wide window visually connects this engineering room to Studio A, a twenty-nine-by-twenty-eight-foot space with a grand piano to one side. The ceiling in there is tall enough for a two-story house; that's because this structure was once precisely that, the home that faced the front yard. In fact, those log-like beams traversing the open area about twelve feet overhead formerly supported the flooring of the upstairs Quinn family living quarters. When later owners gutted the building and eliminated all the second-floor rooms, they had to retain those wall-to-wall beams for reasons of structural integrity. But

today those old timbers also seem to function as decor, setting a rustic tone. The rest of the room harmonizes. Protruding from the back wall are three isolation booths in a row, all capped by a single decorative roofline that slopes into the spacious studio; it is covered with earthen-red Mexican tiles and supported by thick buttresses of white adobe. This place feels as comfortable as a neighborhood cantina.

Chances are that you already are familiar with certain hit songs or seminal recordings that were produced here, if not in this very room then in one of the adjoining spaces, past or present. Yet chances are that you, like most people, might

not even realize that those classic tracks were made in Houston. And it is even less likely that you can trace their origins back to this rather unglamorous setting: an odd-looking building near the University of Houston campus on a dead-end street in a mixed-use neighborhood that exemplifies the gritty juxtapositions permitted by the Bayou City's no-zoning approach to land management.

Given its obscurity, the property at 5626 Brock Street is a fitting analogue to Houston's important yet generally underappreciated role in the evolution of popular music and recording history. And the legacy of this site begins with a man named Quinn. **c**

SugarHill control booth.



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HOUSTON'S UNZONED SOUNDTRACK: A SAMPLER OF GREAT MUSICIANS WHO RECORDED AT 5626 BROCK STREET

The thousands of recordings Bill Quinn and others engineered reflect the breadth and depth of Houston music.

Lightnin' Hopkin and other blues traditionalists made many records there, but so did younger players who cultivated a more progressive, urban blues sound. For instance, influential artists such as **Albert Collins**, **Joe Hughes**, and **Clarence Green** all made their recording debuts at Gold Star.

Gold Star Studio also produced traditional Texas country music by white artists, working often with the prolific producer **Pappy Daily**. The now venerable **George Jones**, who hailed from the Texas Piney Woods, recorded his first seven hit singles there. Other artists included **Benny Barnes** from nearby Beaumont, with his 1956 number two song "Poor Man's Riches," and **Frankie Miller** from near Victoria, with the top-ten tracks "Blackland Farmer" and "Family Man." Some future stars, such as **Willie Nelson** and **Roger Miller**, were raw talents in their Gold Star sessions.

Two Daily-produced songs that registered high on both national pop and R&B charts, early manifestations of the "cross-over" phenomenon, were the humorous 1958 rockabilly shuffle "Chantilly Lace" by the **Big Bopper**—a jive-talking former DJ from Beaumont—and the 1959 number-one pop song "Running Bear" (a star-crossed tragedy about lovers from rival tribes) by **Johnny Preston** from Port Arthur. Mega-successes such as these brought more session activity to Quinn's studio.

In the mid-1960s, Quinn and his staff worked with numerous other producers, including the African-American music mogul **Don Robey**, whose labels were hugely influential in the evolution of blues, R&B, gospel, and pop. The hundreds of sessions with Robey's artists birthed hits such as "Funny (How Time Slips Away)" by **Joe Hinton**; "You're Gonna Make Me Cry" by **O.V. Wright**; "Treat Her Right," the 1965 number-one R&B hit by **Roy Head** (one of Robey's few white artists); "You're All I Need" by **Bobby Bland**; "Cryin' for My Baby" by **Junior Parker**; and "A Friend in Jesus" by the **Mighty Clouds of Joy**.

Other styles of music proliferated at Gold Star, including zydeco—the syncretized blend of black Creole folk music and urban blues personified

by the accordion player and singer **Clifton Chenier**. Though born in Louisiana, Chenier was living in Fifth Ward's Frenchtown when he was "discovered" in 1964 by Chris Strachwitz of California-based Arhoolie Records, who took Chenier to Gold Star to record the first of numerous sessions. The following year Gold Star recorded the immortal "She's About a Mover" by the **Sir Douglas Quintet**—a San Antonio-based, multiethnic rock group led by the now legendary **Doug Sahm**. And the year after that, the folk-rock trio from Corpus Christi called the **Pozo Seco Singers** (featuring a young **Don Williams**, later a country music star) made its folk-pop single "Time," a hit released on New York-based Columbia Records.

After Quinn sold the studio in 1968, it went through several owners. A brief stint (1968–1970) under International Artists, a Houston record label best known for producing Austin's seminal psychedelic rock band, the **13th Floor Elevators**, led to the 1969 hit "Hot Smoke and Sassafras" by the progressive rock group **Bubble Puppy**. The label also recorded singles or long-play albums by various rock bands (including the especially avant-garde **Red Krayola**) as well as bluesman **Lightnin' Hopkins**. After International Artists collapsed, the veteran music producer **Huey Meaux** bought the studio facility and renamed it SugarHill.

Over the next 14 years, Meaux's engineers recorded artists from all over the region. Notable examples are the neo-western swing band **Asleep at the Wheel**, which in 1976 produced one of its signature songs, "Miles and Miles of Texas," at SugarHill, and acclaimed signer-songwriter **Lucinda Williams**, a veteran of the local folk-rock scene who in 1980 cut her first album of original material, *Happy Woman Blues*. But one singer, born **Baldemar Garza Huerta** in the small South Texas town of San Benito, would redefine the standards for commercially successful recordings made on this site. Performing as the 1970s crossover superstar **Freddy Fender** and starting with the bilingual "Before the Last Teardrop Falls" (the first recording ever to register simultaneously as number one on both pop and country Billboard charts), Fender created 20 hit singles that included "Wasted Days and Wasted Nights" and six long-play albums (two that ranked number one), all at SugarHill Studios.

After Meaux sold the facility to Modern

Music Ventures in 1986, SugarHill focused more on contemporary Houston jazz, producing successful albums by **Kellye Gray**, **Sebastian Whitaker**, **Harry Sheppard**, **David Catney**, **Tony Campise**, **Erich Avinger**, **Herb Ellis**, **Joe Lacascio**, and several others. But a renewed emphasis on recording Spanish-language and Tejano artists, a legacy that began with Quinn's late-1940s production of *Conjunto de Maxie Granados*, led in the late 1980s and early 1990s to regular sessions for top-selling Latino groups or singers such as **Xelencia**, **La Fiebre**, **Emilio Navaria**, the **Hometown Boys**, **Jerry Rodriguez** and **Mercedes**, **Rick Gonzalez** and **the Choice**, **Los Dos Gilbertos**, **Johnny Rodriguez**, **Adalberto Gallegos**, **Elsa Garcia**, and others.

In 1997 the ownership of SugarHill Studios changed once again, yet the business plan of cultivating diversity remains. In recent years the studio's most commercially successful productions include five hit singles (two of which crested at number one) and tracks from two hugely popular albums by the stylish all-female R&B group from Houston called **Destiny's Child**, as well as several solo releases by group members, including a 2003 number one hit by the most famous of them all, **Beyoncé Knowles**. Nationally known rappers such as **Lil' Wayne** and **Mack 10** have utilized the studio, as have established country singers such as **Clay Walker** and **Johnny Bush**.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Fifth Ward-born trumpeter **Calvin Owens**, former bandleader for B. B. King, produced at least six albums there.

Gold Star/SugarHill Studios also has recorded countless less-famous stalwarts of the Houston music scene. Different producers create their recordings for different reasons, but the best of them likely grasp a simple truth: obscurity and significant achievement are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Such is surely the case at 5626 Brock Street, for this historic studio site remains largely hidden and unknown, even to the thousands of people who enjoy the music that originated here. And yet for all the memorable hits that came into being in what was once Bill Quinn's house, there are thousands of significant tracks, equally worthy of an audience, which remain largely obscure. Collectively these recordings comprise the rich and unzoned soundtrack of life in Houston.