

## SHOOTING STAR IN AUSTIN'S COUNTRY SCENE

Marcia Ball has earned most of her recognition as a singer and keyboardist who performs Louisiana-style blues and soulful ballads. But for a brief time in the 1970s, she was a trailblazer in the progressive country music scene in Austin, Texas.

Born on March 20, 1949, in Orange, Texas, Ball grew up thirteen miles away in tiny Vinton, Louisiana. In her family, girls were raised to play the piano, and she began taking lessons at age five. By her teens, she had discovered what would be a lifetime love of blues and soul music, and while attending Louisiana State University, she sang and played piano in a blues-based rock band called Gum.

In 1970, Ball started driving to San Francisco with plans to launch a music career there, but her car broke down in Austin, and after discovering the city's exploding music scene, she decided to stay. She soon made fast friends with Bobby Earl Smith, a young bass player in a country band who taught her many of country's classics.

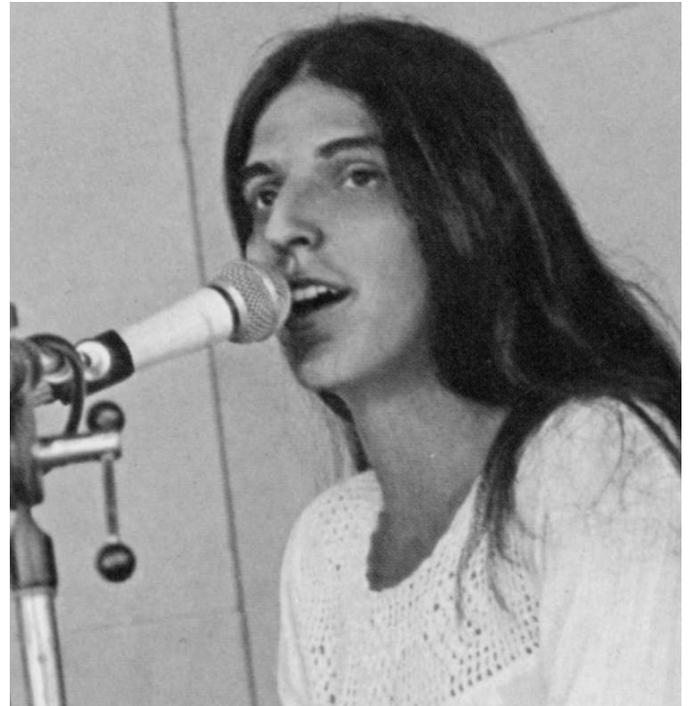
"It gave me goose bumps," Ball later recalled. "It was a real revelation."

Ball, as lead vocalist, joined Smith, David Cook, Steve McDaniels, and John X. Reed to form the band Freda and the Firedogs in 1972. Though their sound was country, their long hair and bell-bottom jeans exuded the rebellious hippie spirit, and they had trouble breaking into Austin's traditional country music venues.

Smith kept pestering the owner of one club, the Broken Spoke, who finally gave the band a date. Freda and the Firedogs managed to win over two groups who rarely mingled at the time: hippies and fans of old-time country music.

"We weren't a hippie band playing hippie music," Ball said. "We were a hippie band playing traditional country. And we played dance music. That was the key. As long as they could dance to it, it was okay."

The band's success helped identify country's appeal to younger markets, and it also helped pave the way for a battalion of progressive country and roots-music artists in Austin and the emergence of Willie Nelson as its general.



"They set a precedent for hip country music," said Carlyne Majer, who ran a 1970s-era Austin club and went on to manage Ball's career for a time.

Freda and the Firedogs didn't last long: They broke up in 1974, and Ball went on to forge a successful solo career singing and playing rhythm and blues mixed with the Cajun, zydeco, swamp pop, and boogie-woogie sounds of Louisiana. Over the years, her work has earned her five Grammy nominations. Still an Austin resident, Ball continues an active performance career.

Freda and the Firedogs recorded one album, in 1972, but because of contract problems, the project was shelved. Thirty years later, Bobby Earl Smith, by then an Austin attorney, went hunting for the original recording and found it on an old reel-to-reel tape still in the producer's possession. The album, *Freda and the Firedogs*, was released in 2002 and greeted with critical acclaim.

"What value might a record unreleased thirty years ago have today? Plenty," Margaret Moser wrote in *The Austin Chronicle* in 2002. "Aside from being a mini-time capsule opened for cosmic delight, Freda and the Firedogs reveal themselves to be among the godparents of Austin's prodigious roots-music obsession."

### SOURCES

*The Austin American-Statesman*,  
*The Austin Chronicle*, *Houston Chronicle*,  
MarciaBall.com, NPR.com, *Texas Monthly*

### LISTEN

"Leaving Louisiana in the Broad Daylight"  
"Marcia's Song" (written by Bobby Earl Smith)  
"When You Come Home Again" (Angela Strehli)