

# AustinLifestyle

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**INSIDE**

How Austin Became  
the Live Music Capital  
of the World

Austin  
Fashion Week  
Looks that Rocked

Music to  
the MAX  
Iconic Pop Art

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**Kenneth Threadgill was cold.** It was December 6, 1933 and Threadgill, a café owner and part-time bootlegger, had been waiting in line all night outside the downtown courthouse to snag Travis County Beer License #1—the first such license issued after the repeal of Prohibition. Threadgill returned to his gas station/beer joint out on the Old Dallas Highway (today North Lamar) tired but happy. Over the years, his homey establishment would welcome an influx of University of Texas beatniks and folk singers—including a shy, artistic young girl named Janis Joplin. \* Johnny Holmes was exuberant. It was VJ Day, 1945—the latest War To End All Wars was finally over. The returning black GIs who would soon be pouring through Fort Hood would head to the tony nightlife scene on East Eleventh and Twelfth streets in segregated Austin, and Holmes would be there to welcome them with a plush new showroom and restaurant. In the celebratory spirit of the day, he decided to call it the Victory Grill. \* Eddie Wilson needed to take a leak. It was 1970 and he'd been drinking beer at a joint on the corner of Riverside and Barton Springs Road when nature called. The line at the men's room was long so he stepped out back to attend to business. As he zipped up, he noticed a big empty building next door. Austin had been without a major rock emporium since the Vulcan Gas Company had closed its doors the year before. Wilson, a budding entrepreneur and band manager, saw in the old National Guard Armory building a Lone Star version of the Fillmore West. Together with his partners, Wilson opened the Armadillo World Headquarters on August 7 of that same year. **And with that, the party well and truly got started.**

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**HOW AUSTIN  
BECAME THE  
\* \* \*  
LIVE MUSIC  
\* \* \*  
CAPITAL OF  
THE WORLD**

**BY JOHN T. DAVIS**

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Willie Nelson, The Backyard, July 4, 2010; Photo by Brenda Ladd.



# T

It wasn't as though Austin, Texas was destined to be the self-proclaimed "Live Music Capital of the World." The Muses did not get together over the Hill Country, give each other a high-five and shout, "Strike up the band, by Zeus!" America boasted great music cities as the twentieth century reached its halfway mark—New York, Nashville, Los Angeles, Memphis, Chicago, Kansas City and, most of all, New Orleans. Austin was not among them.

But Johnny Holmes, Kenneth Threadgill and Eddie Wilson, along with fellow club owners and the legions of musicians they helped nurture, began the process that would transform a small city in the heart of Texas into an international musical landmark.

Austin was, in the 1950s, not a great city in any regard—it was a state capital, a distinction it shared at the time with forty-seven other burghs. It had a university that struggled in the Forties and Fifties for distinction in the face of meddling right-wing regents. There was an Air Force base on the city's southern limits...and that was about it. In Texas alone, Houston, Dallas, Fort Worth and San Antonio all had deeper musical pedigrees.

But there was something to the place...always had been. Nomadic Comanches lingered by Barton Springs and it is impossible to believe they didn't make music with drums and eagle bone whistles as they took their ease beneath the ancient pecan trees.

Free-thinking German immigrants formed Saengerrundes—fraternal singing clubs. Mexican immigrants combined Bohemian polka beats with border melodies in East Side cantinas. Black church choirs and itinerant blues singers warred for their listeners' souls. Beer-sign neon glistened on honky-tonk hardwood dancefloors in hardcore country roadhouses like Dessau Hall and the Skyline Club out on the edge of town.

Something about the place beckoned—the blackland coastal prairies ran up against the escarpment of the Balcones Fault, creating a welcome break in the sameness of the landscape. The Hill Country, with its shady belts of oaks and flowing artesian springs, summoned thirsty souls. A bohemian spirit that managed to thrive in the strict university environment encouraged a certain playfulness in the face

of the hide-bound conformity that ruled much of the rest of the state. There was, in novelist Billy Lee Brammer's memorable phrase, "room enough to caper."

Playwright and songwriter Jo Carol Pierce summed up the languid, beckoning sense of place well for the *Washington Post*: "Austin is where all the Texas kids who grow up in towns where being different could get you maimed or killed come and get to be themselves. Which results in a lot of notes and ideas and energies, all mingling and sparkling, like metaphysical bumper cars...Yep, you can feel it all right. It's all around. It's in the swing music...and in the weird, barbecue-smelling air, and the Christmas lights that drape the bungalows all year long."

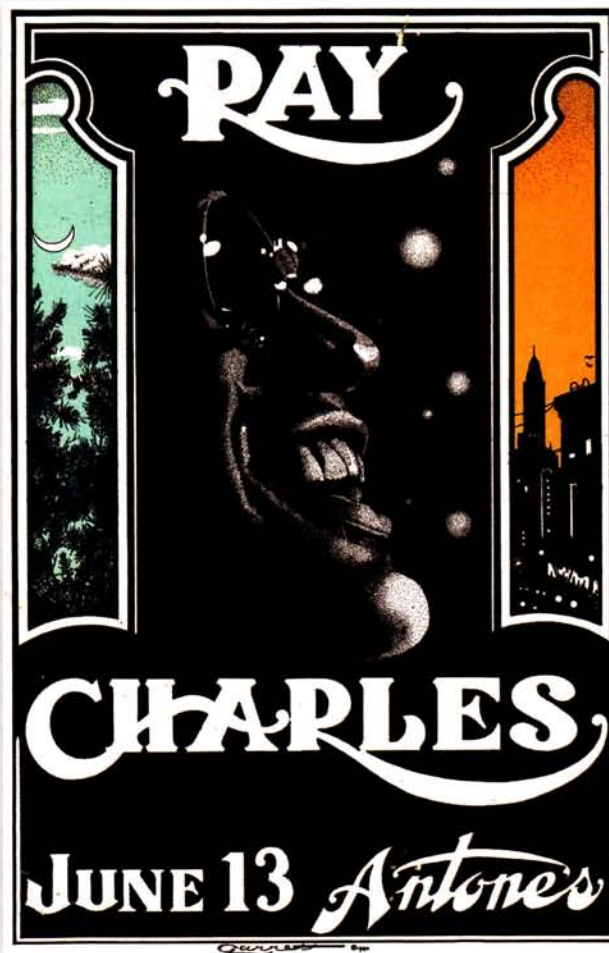
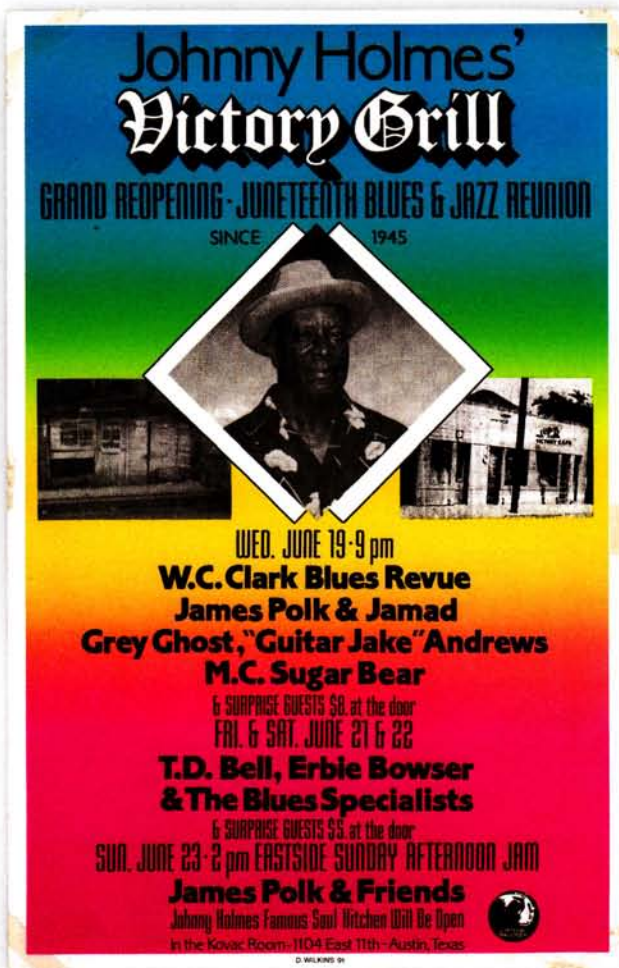
None of this was lost on Willie Nelson when he first rented an apartment south of the river in 1971. Nelson was an A-list songwriter in Nashville (he'd penned "Crazy" for Patsy Cline and "Hello, Walls" for Faron Young, among others) who had only enjoyed middling success with his own recordings.

Willie never disdained Nashville, in and of itself. When you have a product to sell, he explained, you have to take it to the store. Nashville was the store.

Nevertheless, he'd always considered the dancehalls of his native state his natural environment; even if the records weren't selling, he could always work in Texas.

In November of 1970, Nelson recorded a new song entitled "What Can You Do To Me Now?" A month later, two days before Christmas, his Nashville house burned down. Nelson dashed into the water-soaked, smoking wreckage and emerged with his treasured Martin guitar and a stash of much-needed marijuana. Call it a sign. Nelson packed up his extended family of relations and bandmates and set

The one-two punch of Willie Nelson and Austin City Limits really put Austin's music on the map and made many music fans sit up, take notice and want to move here.



Posters from the author's collection. Artists from left to right: D. Wilkins (Victory Grill), Danny Garrett (Ray Charles & Muddy Waters); Guy Juke (Marcia Ball); and Jagmo (John Lee Hooker).

up a temporary Lone Star base camp in a bankrupt dude ranch on the outskirts of Bandera, in the Hill Country. He was back in Texas, but he wasn't home.

His sister Bobbie played and taught piano in Austin, and the more Nelson saw of the laid-back college town with the bubbling-under music scene, the more enamored he became. He saw a fusion taking shape he'd always dreamed of—young Texas kids, raised on rock 'n' roll, belatedly embracing the native country, folk and blues that had long since permeated Austin at places like Threadgill's, the Victory Grill and James White's crown jewel of a honky-tonk, the Broken Spoke.

Nelson came home, in a real sense, when he stepped onstage with his band at the Armadillo World Headquarters on a steamy night in August of 1972.

Pretty much everybody thought he was nuts – or suicidal. A hill-billy singer playing for the same crowd that dug Frank Zappa and Ted Nugent?

Years later, as he prepared to tee off for a round of golf at his recording studio/golf course fiefdom outside of town, Nelson explained his crazy-like-a-fox rationale: "I knew all along that the kids would respond to what we were doing, and my band knew that I knew, so they weren't worried," he said. "But my booking agent thought I was crazy, and so did the industry people in Nashville, New York and Los

Angeles. But they didn't know what we did, they never got out of their offices to check out what was happening."

What was happening, at least in Austin, was a happy frisson of circumstances—a cheap cost-of-living and a relaxed vibe that attracted creative sorts, a young audience of students, capitol staffers and airmen with time on their hands and money in their pockets, and a certain laissez-faire attitude when it came to musical barriers.

"People asked me why all you musicians moved here in 1973, '74, '75," said Asleep At the Wheel bandleader Ray Benson, "And I wasn't trying to be a wise guy, but I tell them that rent was a hundred dollars a month and pot was ten dollars a bag. You couldn't get any better than that. And there was a ready-made audience that came to the Armadillo, Soap Creek Saloon and the Split Rail."

Musical genres began to melt and run like tar on a hot patch of downtown asphalt. Musicians had to be able to sit in with everyone to make a living, so their own influences spilled over and mingled onstage and on record. Folk-rocker Steven Fromholz called the resulting gumbo "Freeform-country-rock-science-fiction-gospel-gum-bluegrass-opera-cowjazz music."

What happened, he went on to explain was this: "All these guys who were drinking tequila and all these guys who were smoking pot said, 'Here,' and they swapped. You had rednecks and you had



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hippies and they were all there for one reason: They loved to get loaded and listen to music and we were doing something they all liked. It was kind of crazy."

Austin's flyover location helped, too. "Austin, being relatively isolated from other cultural and musical influences from New York, Los Angeles and Nashville, could develop as an incubator for singers/songwriters/musicians to develop and experiment with their own sounds," theorized *Austin City Limits* executive producer Terry Lickona.

Across town from the Armadillo, at a tucked-away honky-tonk called Soap Creek Saloon, Doug Sahm held sway as embodiment of the new cross-pollinating musical ethos.

Unlike most of the city's musicians, Sahm had actual radio hits with his band, the Sir Douglas Quintet, and as such was something of a mentor to the locals. His frequent shows at Soap Creek were speed-of-sound Texas music primers that leapt from Western Swing to the bayou R&B of Bobby "Blue" Bland and the blues shuffles of T-Bone Walker to a conjunto polka to a Cajun breakdown and finally winding up back at his own neo-psychedelic hits, "She's About A Mover" and "The Rains Came."

Sahm notwithstanding, over the years no one has exemplified this, let's say, elasticity better than Nelson, who has recorded with everyone from Wynton Marsalis to Waylon Jennings and crafted albums

'You had rednecks and you had hippies and they were all there for one reason: They loved to get loaded and listen to music and we were doing something they all liked. It was kind of crazy.'

based on everything from reggae to American Songbook standards.

The artistic freedom in the city was breathtaking. "Audiences actually encouraged performers to show them something new and completely different," wrote journalist and author Joe Nick Patoski. "The only price was the absence of all the material trappings associated with success." Some things never change.

# Today the city boasts over two hundred live music venues and is home to over nineteen hundred bands and musicians. Music is the way Austin shows itself to the world.

The “progressive country” movement of the mid-1970s, spearheaded by Willie, Jerry Jeff Walker, Michael Martin Murphey and Rusty Weir, eventually foundered in a blizzard of cocaine, provincial ignorance (Marcia Ball’s group, Freda and the Firedogs, let an opportunity to work with legendary soul/R&B producer Jerry Wexler slip through their fingers), lackluster national sales, and changing tastes. The Armadillo, the temple of Austin music for a tumultuous decade, closed its doors on New Year’s Eve 1980. (But ‘Dillo co-founder Eddie Wilson went on to re-open Kenneth Threadgill’s abandoned gas station as a restaurant and club).

Meanwhile, a young generation of blues musicians, mentored by the scene that Johnny Holmes and other East Side clubowners had helped create, and nurtured by Clifford Antone, a blues devotee from Port Arthur with a downtown club of his own, picked up the musical mantle. The Fabulous Thunderbirds, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Lou Ann Barton and Marcia Ball painted a different face on Austin’s musical persona. Vaughan, in particular, vaulted to a magnitude of international stardom that even Willie might envy before he perished in a helicopter crash in 1990.

The scene kept spinning off new iterations: Younger singer-songwriters took up the storyteller’s mantle first worn by the likes of Townes Van Zandt, Guy Clark and Jerry Jeff—hometown girl Nanci Griffith, a gangling Texas Aggie named Lyle Lovett and his compañero from College Station, Robert Earl Keen as well as singer-songwriter Lucinda Williams...The 1978 appearance of the Sex Pistols at a club in San Antonio jump-started a hometown punk/New Wave/DIY boom in the city. Punk standard bearers The Clash took West Texas rocker (and Austinite) Joe Ely under their wing. The True Believers, spearheaded by Alejandro and Javier Escovedo, in turn gave The Clash a run for their money. Ingredients of the gumbo might change, but the cauldron kept simmering.

It was the phenomenal longevity of the PBS music series *Austin City Limits* (now in its 35th year) that took Austin to the world. The image of the city as a bohemian oasis where musicians ply their trade on a bucolic hill overlooking the city skyline (to this day some folks think the show is filmed outdoors) became its most significant and enduring cultural export. “Millions of people have seen and heard Austin through the window of *ACL*, and that feeds the impression that music – live music – is the heart and soul of this city,” said *ACL*’s Lickona.

The series in turn became the namesake for a wildly successful outdoor festival, overlooking the real skyline, which attracted A-list talent from Bob Dylan to Coldplay to Pearl Jam, as well as young music fans from all over the world. To paraphrase the character in John Ford’s *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, when the legend becomes fact, market the legend.

Thanks largely to the South By Southwest interactive music and film festival, launched as a music-only event in 1987, Austin finally transcended its small-town mentality (a business meeting often consisted of sucking down a joint and a six-pack by the lake in the Seventies) to become a truly international music bazaar.

As Casey Monahan, who has interacted with the city’s music scene first as a journalist and now as head of the state’s Texas Music Office noted, “Beginning in the early-to-mid-1980s, music people in Texas, and especially in Austin, came together (mostly through the Texas Music Association) to press governments, chambers of commerce, media and business leaders to begin to consider music as an industry with huge growth potential and not solely as a diversion. “Music is a dominant part of Texas culture that helped to define who we are to the outside world, whether they be tourists, television viewers, transplants or relocating businesses. The one-two punch of Willie Nelson and *Austin City Limits* really put Austin’s music on the map and made many music fans sit up, take notice and want to move here.”

Today, according to the city’s convention and visitor’s bureau website, the city boasts over two hundred live music venues and is home to over nineteen hundred bands and musicians. The calendar is dotted with annual festivals, including SXSW, the Austin City Limits Festival, the Urban Music Fest, the Fun, Fun, Fun Fest, the Pachanga Festival and more. According to a city report presented in 2005, roughly one billion dollars and over eighteen thousand jobs can be attributed to the direct or indirect influence of music and related industries on the local economy. Thanks in large part to *ACL* and SXSW, but also due to the tens of thousands of greater- and lesser-known musicians who have labored in the city’s clubs, honky-tonks, juke joints, coffeehouses, listening rooms, beer joints, concert halls and, yep, street corners over the decades, live music has become the city’s inescapable cultural signifier. Music is the way Austin shows itself to the world.

“So many things contributed to the history of our music scene, from Threadgill’s in the Thirties to what was going on at the Victory Grill in the Forties to the psychedelic era of the Sixties to Antone’s legacy that lives on today,” said Rose Reyes who, before she became the Austin Convention and Visitor’s Director of Music Marketing, managed singer Tish Hinojosa and produced shows for Texas Folklife Resources. “I love Austin so much, I can’t imagine living anywhere else,” she continued. “I enjoy the culture of other music cities, but at the end of the day this town has my heart. You can’t put your finger on it, but you can be yourself here. It’s welcoming to artists and particularly musicians. They can be themselves; they don’t have to be like anybody else.”

Or, as Willie Nelson—still going strong at 77—once sang: “Miracles appear in the strangest of places...” Somewhere out in the Hill Country, the Muses are still dancing. AL



Robert Plant, Austin City Limits, September 15, 2002; photo by Scott Newton.