

'Austin City Limits': The lights will go out in Studio 6A, but the magic - and music - will go on

By **John T. Davis**

SPECIAL TO THE AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Updated: 7:35 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 2, 2010

Published: 7:59 a.m. Saturday, Oct. 2, 2010

Turn out the lights

The party's over

It seems that all good things must end

Let's call it a night

The party's over

And tomorrow starts the same old thing again ...'

— 'The Party's Over,' by Willie Nelson

In New Orleans, the Second Line is a funeral march.

The bereaved march behind the band that leads the sad procession winding through the streets to the brick-crypt cemeteries, where the dead are laid to rest beneath dripping century-old live oaks. They march along solemnly to the old, sad hymns — "A Closer Walk With Thee," "In the Sweet Bye and Bye."

But on the way back from the graveside, the Second Line is transformed into a joyous rolling chorus of mourners turned celebrators, as the band turns up the heat and the beat and transforms a funeral into a party.

It's all about rebirth, baby.

Thus it was on one hot night in late June, in the sixth-floor KLRU studio home of the acclaimed PBS series "Austin City Limits." At the end of a nearly two-hour set, New Orleans horn man Troy "Trombone Shorty" Andrews jumped off the stage and staged an impromptu Second Line processional, wailing away on "When the Saints Go Marching In" and "Down By the Riverside" as he and his band wound their way through a delirious, dancing, sweat-soaked audience.

It was just one of a thousand indelible musical moments that have taken place in Studio 6A in Building B of the Jesse H. Jones Communication Center on the University of Texas campus. That nearly windowless, wholly unremarkable building has, for 36 years, hosted television's longest-running music show, the series that has taken Austin's musical identity to the world.

But the room's proud history is coming to an end. Sometime in November, if things go as planned, the last note of the last encore of the last artist to perform on the venerable stage will resound. Studio 6A will revert to more prosaic uses — educational and community events, talk shows, town hall forums.

Then, after the holidays, "ACL" will move into its spanking-new downtown high-tech headquarters in the new 2,750-seat Moody Theater ("Austin City Limits Live at Moody Theater" is the official, if cumbersome, name of the venue) on the ground floor of the new Block 21/W Hotel complex on Second Street. The difference between that gleaming venue and the comfortably scruffy digs on the UT campus could not be more pronounced — or more

promising.

So it wasn't as if Trombone Shorty was playing for "ACL's" last rites.

It's about rebirth.

'People who see the show in Belgium and Holland — they think it's outside and they want to know why it never rains.'

Jimmy LaFave

in the book 'Austin City Limits: 25 Years of American Music,' by John T. Davis

It's not filmed outside, of course, although to this day some folks think it is. The iconic Austin skyline backdrop that surrounds the stage had its debut in 1982 for Season 7. It is a jury-rigged construction of plywood and Christmas lights, like something a particularly ambitious high school theater group might construct. It's covered with drapes when the studio is tasked for non-"ACL" productions.

The room is a cube ("a black box," executive producer Terry Lickona calls it), the distant ceiling concealed behind a bewildering profusion of lights, cables and speakers. It is every inch a utilitarian workspace. The people breathe life into the place.

One of those individuals is back in the rumpus room-sized control room behind the bleachers. Gary Menotti, the burly director who has called the shots since 1981, is groaning. "I started here when I was 19," he mock-laments. "If I can spend 35 more years at this, I'll be 90 years old. Give me a break!"

It's Aug. 4. Menotti and the rest of the staff are taking a seventh-inning stretch between episodes of a "double shoot" taping featuring up-and-coming Texas singer/songwriter Hayes Carll and "ACL" veteran Robert Earl Keen.

When he's on, facing the array of big monitors and individual camera screens, Menotti resembles nothing so much as a dancing bear, bobbing delicately from side to side and sweeping his arms and scooping his hands in grand gestures as he communicates in guttural shorthand to his cameramen on the floor: "Ready, two, take two.\u2026 Gimme a wide shot, Vance, come around the other way.\u2026"

Menotti, Lickona and other decades-long staffers like audio director David Hough, lighting director Walter Olden, makeup coordinator Glenda Facemire, technical director Ed Fuentes, stage manager Ray Lucero and camera operators Michael Emery and Vance Holmes communicate apparently by means of telepathy and mutual anticipation. There's seemingly less turnover among the "ACL" staff than among the Supreme Court. ("Look at him," said Menotti, gesturing to a camera operator using a nearby phone who traditionally had an eye for the ladies. "In the old days, he'd be lining up someone for after the show. Now he's saying goodnight to his 5-year-old.")

The intuitive camaraderie and teamwork forged from such long-standing collaboration has its benefits. Earlier in the year, reggae godfather Jimmy Cliff was scheduled to make his "Austin City Limits" debut. There was a problem — one that even the experienced "ACL" crew had never confronted.

The star was at his hotel. But his band was in Salt Lake City, unable to make their airline connection to Austin. That meant no sound check, no dress rehearsal, none of the safety net that Menotti and his cameramen depended on to frame their shots. They would film Cliff's performance cold. It was the kind of event that would have normal TV crews tearing their hair, walking in tiny circles and reaching for a pack of Xanax.

Menotti and Co. handled it with aplomb. "Naw," said the director. "I didn't mind it at all.

"You can't stress out over what you don't have control over. It's a lot of fun to try to guess and anticipate what's going on. Of course, once I get in post (production), I'll get frustrated because I'll hear some things I'd like to cover and I don't have the shot. But you just go with the flow."

Downstairs, before his taping (yes, they still call it a "taping," although all the relevant technology is digital), Robert Earl Keen sat in his fifth-floor dressing room and reminisced about a particularly memorable night in 6A.

"My wife and I have been married for 24 years, and we got together here," he recalled. "We saw Nanci Griffith taping a show in 1985, and afterward a bunch of us went to the Texas Chili Parlor. Kathleen (the future Mrs. Keen) and I talked and talked and talked. We looked up and everybody had split — it was just us drinking the bar dry and having a big time."

Keen taped his first "ACL" episode in 1995, and repetition has not staled the experience. Like a lot of repeat performers, he's come to regard the "ACL" crew as a sort of extended family. "So many of the same people are still here," he said. "You get to see 'em and talk to 'em. Paul Sweeney, who works down in the editing room, he and I played together in a band back in the '80s. There's a certain amount of glory in the fact that you've been in the music business this long and still have some comrades left."

Likewise, 6A is less a TV studio than a familiar and treasured performance venue, Keen said. "The space just feels like the best of all good gigs," Keen said. "The television thing and the recording thing are almost invisible. You don't have to go to the host afterward and be witty and charming."

'I remember sitting in my bedroom in Conway, Arkansas, and watching a Songwriter Special with Willie and Rodney Crowell and Lyle and thinking that was doable. Somehow, if your songs were good enough, there was a way to get there.'

Hayes Carll

before his Aug. 4 taping

The day after the Carll/Keen taping, a group of "ACL" stakeholders, including KLRU CEO and GM Bill Stotesbery, executive producer Terry Lickona, brand development chief Ed Bailey and a few others sat in a conference room downstairs from 6A and talked about their own experiences and memories in the studio.

"I was used to working in the (Rock and Roll) Hall of Fame and watched it being built as a \$150 million I.M. Pei monument," said Bailey, who first saw Jimmie Vaughan tape the show in 1997 when he joined the staff. "And the first time I walked into 6A, I felt more power walking into that venue than in a building I had helped build. I felt the deep integrity and passion for that room. It felt like an amazing canvas, an amazing opportunity." (The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame named Building B and the series an official Rock and Roll Landmark last October.)

"I've been in Austin since 1977 and went to 'ACL' anytime I could score tickets," said Stotesbery, who treasures the memory of Tom Waits' and Leon Redbone's one and only taping in Season 4 in 1979. He, like the others, sees himself as a keeper of the flame.

"I think there's always been an intrinsic feeling that the brand was strong and the show's vision was right. I came on (as CEO and GM) six years ago, and the search for a new venue was going on nine years before that. This has been a long-term project of making sure that 'ACL' had the foundation it needed to survive, but never doubting that it would survive."

Maury Sullivan, KLRU's senior vice president for community engagement, found herself on the wrong end of the camera at the first taping she attended in 2000. "My first show was Kelly Willis and John Hiatt, and I attended that as a fan. I was sitting in the audience and the camera came over to the crowd and focused on me and my husband, and I had a Cindy Brady moment — I didn't know what to do! Deer in the headlights. But that was a great introduction to 'ACL.'"

Later, as a staffer, Sullivan witnessed a particularly poignant moment when Rosanne Cash arrived for a rehearsal.

"She was coming through the hallway where all of Scott's (staff photographer Scott Newton) pictures were hanging, and she had her son with her. She pointed to a picture of Johnny Cash and asked if the boy recognized anyone on the wall. And he said, 'That's grandpa!'"

Cash herself recalled a moment far more fraught from her latest taping last March. Her guitar strap was misplaced, and not just any strap — she had sewed on it a piece of material she'd found in her father's desk after he died. "Oh, my God, I was paralyzed," she recalled. "I thought it had been stolen. I was frozen inside until it turned up. I didn't say out loud how important it was to me." No need, she was told. Everyone in the audience

could sense the drama of the moment. The audience is so close to the performer that every tic and nuance communicates itself instantly. That intimacy is one of the things that has made "ACL" unique.

After three-decades-and-change in the same space, there are things Terry Lickona will miss about 6A. And things he emphatically will not.

"The studio was never designed to accommodate the type of production we've had for the past 36 years, with a live studio audience. There's the difficulty of sharing the elevators with the rest of the building." (To this day, the artists are brought up from the fifth-floor dressing rooms on the freight elevator.) "There's only two bathrooms down on the third floor, and one on the sixth. Inadequate dressing rooms, storage space. We're not going to miss that."

On the other hand, there is the history

"I occasionally go into 6A to record voice-overs for the show, and there's nobody else there and they close the doors and leave me alone with a microphone," Lickona continued. "And I'll look around and it's a whole different sensation when it's an empty room. If I wanted to get nostalgic, I could say" — and here Lickona pitched his voice low for drama — "I can hear the voices!"

"But I don't hear any voices."

'It's kind of mind-boggling that I've been part of their family for over 16 years.'

Vince Gill

in 1984, 'Austin City Limits: 25 Years of American Music'

During tapings, Lickona sits at the center of the front control panel, to the right of Gary Menotti. To the right of Lickona, in turn, sit a pair of young women — Emily Joyce and Leslie (aka "The Other Leslie") Nichols. During the show, they are in charge of delivering live Twitter updates to "ACL's" online fans. They also maintain a blog on the "ACL" website. Besides the advent of digital recording technology, the explosive growth of Internet social networking is unquestionably the biggest change to affect the show. The two women said the show has several thousand Twitter followers and growing.

"For the first time, we're able to talk to the viewer in real time," said Nichols. "People in Austin have always felt like they have a stake in the show. But with the Internet and social media, I see that ownership extending past our borders."

"Social media is a great fit for us, because we are organic, and we're trying to be accessible and intimate and have those conversations with people who are like us," Joyce added.

Like a lot of the artists who appear on the show, Joyce literally grew up with the program. "I do remember my parents watching it, like, religiously, so I was familiar with it," she said. "But the first time I came to a taping was when I was skipping a class. I'm pretty sure it was a Lyle Lovett show. The one that really stood out when I was a KLRU intern was the Townes Van Zandt tribute — I remember leaving a final early to come to that," she said, laughing.

Nichols recalled, "I remember thinking I have the best job ever. And I was a receptionist!"

'It was cool. All the guys in the band, we grew up watching the show. We grew up watching our heroes play on the show.'

Kenny Wayne Shepherd

'Austin City Limits: 25 Years of American Music'

On Aug. 24, the show hosted a taping by R&B vocalist John Legend, backed up by the jazz/funk group the Roots.

"Interesting combo tonight," someone said to music critic and KGSR disc jockey Andy Langer. "Oh, you mean black people on 'ACL'" he quipped. Langer was alluding to the show's long-standing disinclination to book rap and

hip-hop acts (though the show has booked soul, blues and R&B acts since its inception).

Still, the show's talent horizon has expanded drastically, starting in Season 26 in 2000/2001, coincident with the hiring of Ed Bailey to "build out the brand," a new partnership with C3 Presents and the establishment of the C3-produced Austin City Limits Music Festival.

Whereas the show's silver anniversary season had featured a familiar blend of country (Garth Brooks, Willie Nelson, Kenny Rogers), blues (Robert Cray), Americana (the Mavericks, Wilco) and Texas/Austin artists (Joe Ely, Lyle Lovett, Willie Nelson), suddenly over the next couple of years acts like Phish, David Byrne, Robert Plant, Fountains of Wayne, Ben Harper, Ozomatli, Modest Mouse and the Shins found themselves on the "ACL" stage. Many of them seemed just as awed to stand on the stage as their roots-music elders before them.

Maury Sullivan recalled, "The first show I worked on staff was Phish (in Season 26). You could feel the floor vibrating from people dancing. There were people in every stairwell in the building, trying to get in.

"One of the things that struck me, and I remember it to this day, was Trey Anastasio talking about how when they were starting out and touring, and they were coming through Austin in their van, they got 'space available' tickets to see the show. And he gestured from the stage and said, 'We stood right there,' and what an honor it was to be appearing now. It was very powerful."

Legend, though, appeared to be too cool to gush. "Glad to be here," he said at one point.

Before he took the stage, familiar rituals reasserted themselves downstairs: The line of fans waiting to get into the studio coiled across the patio of the communications complex, reserved seat ticket-holders in one queue, hopefuls in another.

Virginia Ivey has done, in her words, "every single volunteer job" available on the show since the late '80s. These days she greets fans and hands out programs in the studio foyer. She can always spot the first-timers.

"People come up to me and are just in complete awe at being there," she said. "They can't believe they're standing in that space and that all the people in the photos on the wall really played there. It's just this huge thing. And it gives me a greater appreciation for having been able to experience all that myself."

Some fans, in for a long wait, carried take-out pizza from across the street. Veterans warned newbies that the only bathrooms were three floors down. Several greeted the volunteers by name as they were handed programs and ushered into the studio. Everyone lunged for the free glasses of cold beer, the magic elixir that has lubricated "ACL" tapings for many years.

Soon, within the next six months or so, those burnished rituals will give way to new ones — finding downtown parking, negotiating the byways of the new Moody Theater, rubbing elbows with a new generation of fans and artists. \u2026

Although the new space was only a raw concrete shell when I took a guided tour in early June, one could already see the outlines of a modern, fan-friendly venue taking shape — the tiered seating, the ability to configure the room for large and small crowds, concession and lounging areas, multiple bathrooms (bathrooms!), ticket booths, an expanded backstage and more. The only things missing are the life's blood of the staff, the gravitas of the artists and the veneer of history. The Moody Theater is a blank slate, just as 6A once was.

"We have the old and we'll move on to the new," said Rosanne Cash, who knows a thing or two about transitions. "So many things disappear and change, and you realize that what remains is the spirit of the thing and the people. I think 'ACL' could plant itself anywhere and be totally great."

One icon won't be making the trip downtown — the venerable skyline backdrop is staying put, too old and fragile to move.

"I think the backdrop is part of the history of that studio," said Bill Stotesbery. "And at least for the foreseeable future we're going to keep it there to represent what that studio's history is."

It helps the sense of continuity that "ACL Presents: Satellite Sets," a new online series featuring new and up-and-coming bands, will continue to be filmed in the studio. Live music will still be performed in 6A. It is, somehow, a

gratifying thing to know.

At some point in the next six months, perhaps around the advent of South by Southwest, someone (if Terry Lickona knows, he ain't saying) will walk out to center stage in Moody Theater and face a crowd abuzz with anticipation. He or she will gaze out at the faces in the dark, pick up a guitar and strike a chord. And, as Willie Nelson says, the party begins again.

It's about rebirth.

Upcoming shows on KLRU

Season 36, the final season taped in the original studio, premiered Saturday with the Jimmy Cliff episode. Already scheduled to air:

Oct. 9: Spoon

Oct. 16: Patty Griffin and Friends

Oct. 23: Alejandro Escovedo/Trombone Shorty

Oct. 30: Robert Earl Keen/Hayes Carll

Nov. 6: Steve Martin/Sarah Jarosz

Nov. 13: Rosanne Cash/Brandi Carlile

Nov. 20: John Legend and the Roots

More information (and ticket giveaways for upcoming tapings): www.austincitylimits.org

Find this article at:

[Print this page](#)

[Close](#)

<http://www.austin360.com/music/austin-city-limits-the-lights-will-go-out-949667.html>

