

## Review: Willie Nelson at the Backyard

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God, with the assistance of Willie Nelson (or maybe it was the other way round), wrote a fitting close to the 16-year run of the Backyard on Sunday night.

Nelson was wrapping up his 90-minute, 31-song set just after midnight with a rousing rendition of "I Saw the Light." As he was singing the final choruses, the first assertive drafts of a cold front began to shake the limbs of the big oaks around the venue. The temperature dropped precipitously, the big Texas flag behind the stage threatened to break loose and the capacity crowd felt the tang in the air that presages true autumn.

The signs seemed clear: Seasons change. Nothing is forever. Things end.

Or maybe not. Earlier in the evening, the Backyard's owner, Direct Events head honcho Tim O'Connor, stood proudly by a series of architectural drawings detailing a "new" Backyard to be built—possibly—on land nearby the current venue. He seemed—and it's an uncharacteristic stance for him—coy about the joint's future. "Well, we're not quite done," he told a reporter, although after being pressed for a definitive answer on the prospects of a new venue, he retreated into "No comment."

"I don't know" if O'Connor will pursue a new incarnation of the Backyard, said Eric Herron of Sixthriver Architects, who generated the sketches of the proposed structure. "But if he can't recreate it better than it is, I don't think so."

Still, at the end of the night, O'Connor, with members of his staff onstage, ceremoniously took down and folded up a large Backyard flag. The implication being, of course, that it might one day fly over a new iteration of what had been one of the city's most beloved performance spaces. It was, he said, "the end of a great run."

The last day at the Backyard was something of a great run in and of itself, a 10-hour extravaganza that featured the cream of Austin's musical crop, including the Gourds, Ruthie Foster, Carolyn Wonderland, Grupo Fantasma, Kelly Willis, Jimmie Vaughan and others.

By the time Nelson took the stage about 10:30 p.m., the crowd had been treated to blues, gospel, country, cumbia, Western Swing, indie rock and more. The show resembled one of Willie's famous Fourth of July Picnics in microcosm.

Even after such a musical banquet, the crowd's enthusiasm for Nelson's set remained palpable. His opening-season performances at the Backyard have, over the years, become one of the rites of spring and, as O'Connor noted, there were people at the show who weren't even born when Nelson and his Family Band started playing the joint.

Limbering up with “Whiskey River” (one of the constants in an ever-changing universe) and “Still Is Still Moving to Me,” Nelson eased into his vintage medley of “Funny How Time Slips Away/Crazy/Night Life.” His stoic lyric, “Ain’t it funny how time slips away,” had a fresh resonance under the circumstances; “We’re happy to help you close this beer joint,” he said to O’Connor.

The hits flew by—“Yesterday’s Wine,” “Georgia,” “Me and Paul,” “I Gotta Get Drunk,” “On the Road Again”—and for a time it was possible to pretend that the Backyard hadn’t been gobbled up by a dubious vision of “progress.” The nighttime shadows and the big trees almost—but not quite—obscured the strip mall that has engulfed the once-isolated venue.

There was a sort of a balm in Nelson’s timeless music, played one last time under the ancient oaks, as they began to stir under the rush of wind coming down from the plains. Time slips away all right, but, as Willie sings in “Yesterday’s Wine”: “Miracles appear in the strangest of places.”

Perhaps—just perhaps—the last chapter in the Backyard’s storied saga has not been written just yet.