

IS AUSTIN STILL AUSTIN? A CULTURAL ANALYSIS THROUGH SOUND

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## **Abstract**

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For the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Austin, Texas was defined by its culture and unique personality. The traits that defined the city ushered in a progressive community that was seldom found in the South. In the 1960s, much of the new and young demographic chose music as the medium to share ideas and find community. The following decades saw Austin become a mecca for live music. Austin's changing culture became defined by the music heard in the plethora of music venues that graced the city streets. As the city recruited technology companies and developed its downtown, live music suffered.

People from all over the world have moved to Austin, in part because of the unique culture and live music. The mass-migration these individuals took part in led to the downfall of the music industry in Austin. This thesis will explore the rise of music in Austin, its direct ties with culture, and the eventual loss of culture. I aim for the reader to finish this thesis and think about what direction we want the city to go in.

### **Acknowledgments**

Thank you to my advisor Professor Thomas Palaima and second-reader Richard Brennes for the support and valuable contributions to my research. I also want to thank all the incredible Plan II professors and staff for offering my peers and me a world-class education that we will carry with us for the rest of our lives. The impact of the program on my life is immeasurable and I am grateful to be considered a member of the Plan II community. I also thank my family for their constant love and support that has enabled me to achieve my academic dreams. Finally, I offer my gratitude to the thousands of Austinites who have made this city so special, I have taken great pleasure in reading your stories.

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## Introduction

I spent time growing up in Washington D.C., Mexico City, El Salvador, and El Paso. However, nowhere created a sense of home like Austin did. I moved to the Texas capital to attend the University of Texas in the fall of 2016. I quickly realized there was something different about Austin, compared to any other place I had visited. The people are kind, downtown is primarily dedicated residential living, and virtually any activity is no more than a ten-minute drive away.

My parents attended the University of Texas in the 1980s and they are quick to comment they do not recognize the Austin I now call home. When visiting, my father pointed to the street corner in the West Campus neighborhood where the duplex he lived in once stood, now replaced by a luxury apartment building. He also reminisced being able to see the hills south of Austin and the green fields East of I-35, which are now seemingly a part of a growing concrete jungle.

Much like any young adult living in Austin during the 70s and 80s, my parents tell stories of all the bars and music venues they would attend on a weekly basis. To that generation of Austinites, spotting Stevie Ray Vaughn sitting at the front of the room, enjoying music by an artist no one knew, could be described as a common occurrence. Live music was not just a fraction of their cultural activities, it defined them.

I loved every minute I spent in Austin and am lucky to have the people whom I call friends, but why was my experience so different from previous generations'? I attended numerous concerts and shows, but for a steep price and with crowds in the thousands. Enjoying live music is a treat to me but was a ritual for my parents and their friends. In 1991, Austin City Council passed a resolution officially naming the city the "Live Music Capital of the World."

Now being used by the city for promotion, the slogan has created negative feedback loops, dismantling what once was a city that fostered musicians and their talents.

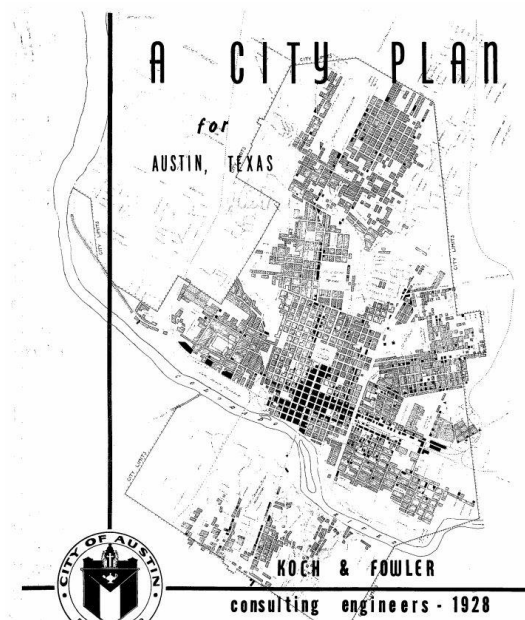
When I talk about my college town to friends, I often cite the amazing ‘culture.’ However, it becomes increasingly difficult to offer a definition to the word. What is Austin’s culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Like it or not, it is not founded on live music. In the ‘60s and ‘70s, music not only ushered in the city’s new era, it defined the culture that everybody cannot help to reminisce about. If a city destroys the defining aspect of its culture, what is left?

This thesis will examine the development of live music in Austin along with the city’s culture over time. The structure is chronological, identifying key places, people, and events that changed the city’s landscape over time. Examples to justify the cause and effect relationships are sourced from interviews, news articles, and historical databases. I aim to prove that Austin’s culture was directly tied to live music. Furthermore, the erosion of the industry in the 1990s and 21<sup>st</sup> century have caused the city to lack a cultural foundation moving forward.

To offer a brief roadmap on the structure of this thesis, I will begin with the passing of the new city plan in 1928. As I move through the city’s history, sections of the thesis are chronological, highlighting cultural shifts and events in every decade leading up to 2020. Finally, I will end with my predictions on what the city’s culture will be for future generations of proud Austinites.

## Historical Background

### *The Plan*



*From: City of Austin Archives*

Growing rapidly in the 1920s, the city of Austin was in dire need of city planning, infrastructure, and revitalization. The 1928 city plan required a \$4.25 million bond issue and proposed improvements to the sewage system, streets, schools, hospitals, and fire department.<sup>1</sup> The proposal also called for the building of parks, a public library, and an airport. The 1928 city plan led to Zilker Park, Barton Springs, and the Deep Eddy Pool being developed throughout the 1930s. The authors of the plan stated, “play grounds and recreation facilities are as much a necessity to the health and happiness of people as are its schools, sewer systems, water supply, pavements' and drainage.”<sup>2</sup>

As the Great Depression swept across the nation, Austin was not immune to hard times and financial burden. Trade and commerce were depleted, unemployment rose, and wages

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<sup>1</sup> Koch and Fowler.

<sup>2</sup> Koch and Fowler, 20-21.

declined. The University of Texas staff experienced a 25% wage reduction. Although the city was in economic turmoil, Austin's population grew by 66% during the 1930s.<sup>3</sup> When compared to other regions in the United States, the effects of the Great Depression on Austin were favorable. The vast government and educational institutions that employed thousands of residents supported the city. Being home to the capital, Austin also had strong political influence. By the end of the 1930s Austin had secured more Public Works Administration loans than any other city in Texas.<sup>4</sup> The funds were used to continue city infrastructure development and public projects. The University of Texas used the federal funds to build The Tower and other campus improvements.<sup>5</sup>

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*Racial Divide*

Segregation was prevalent prior to the 1928 city plan. African American settlements were scattered across the city and operated their own schools, businesses, and churches. By 1930 most of the black population was forcibly relocated to East Austin, an action recommended by the 1928 city plan.<sup>6</sup> The authors write,

*It is our recommendation that the nearest approach to the solution of the race segregation problem will be the recommendation of this district as a negro district; and that all the facilities and conveniences be provided the negroes in this district, as an incentive to draw the negro population to this area.*

*This will eliminate the necessity of duplication of white and black*

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<sup>3</sup> "City of Austin Population History." *Austintexas.gov*, City of Austin, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> "Records of the Public Works Administration [PWA]." *National Archives and Records Administration*.

<sup>5</sup> "Austin New Deal Projects." *Living New Deal*.

<sup>6</sup> Koch and Fowler, 57.



*schools, white and black parks, and other duplicate facilities for this area.*

Schools, housing, and public transportation were only available to African Americans in East Austin by the end the 1930s. The community began to establish its own small businesses, new churches, and social institutions.

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The 1950s in Austin was the era of desegregation and beginning of modern cultural and social institutions. The KTBC local television station began regular broadcasting,<sup>7</sup> the YMCA of Austin became chartered,<sup>8</sup> and entertainment venues such as the Burnet Drive-In cinema were opened. The most influential institutions that emerged were the famous music venues such as the Continental Club and Skyline Club. Rock and roll, jazz and blues dominated the Austin circuit, creating a diverse pool of talent and fans.

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<sup>7</sup> "About Us." *FOX 7 Austin*.

<sup>8</sup> "Our History." *YMCA of Austin*.

### Draft Beer, Not the Boys

Modern culture in the United States drastically developed in the 1960s. The Kennedy Assassination turned hope into sadness, eventually turning into frustration and anger.<sup>9</sup> The tragedies in the 1960s led a generation of Americans to question the long-held values of servitude to country and God. Americans took to the streets to protest the Vietnam War and racial inequality. The rebellion also took the form of a cultural revolution. The negative attitudes towards the established institutions were primarily expressed through music.<sup>10</sup>

As the cultural revolution arrived in the Texas capital, the city was on its way to become a full-fledged music town. The ‘hippie’ movement became dominant, and they established the new culture through music. The cultural activities that began to dominate the city were rock and roll, folk singing, and experimentation with drugs.<sup>11</sup>

By the end of the ‘60s, Austin had become a full-fledged music town. The demographic and political changes were identifiable in the prevalence of rock and roll and psychedelic rock. No other cultural activities defined the era like music. The city was still an epicenter for country-western music, promoted by venues such as the Skyline Club and the Broken Spoke. However, the traditional genre began to coexist with the counterculture, a seemingly rare occurrence for a city the size of Austin.

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#### *Vulcan Gas Company*

Austin’s counterculture searched for a home to share their music. The Fred was the first real attempt to create a permanent music space. The establishment was quickly raided by the

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<sup>9</sup> Barone, Michael. “How JFK's Assassination Changed American Politics.” *Washington Examiner*.

<sup>10</sup> Nicholls, Tracey. “Music and Social Justice.” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

<sup>11</sup> Moretta, John A. “Political Hippies and Hip Politicos: Counterculture Alliance and Cultural Radicalism in 1960s Austin, Texas.” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*.

Texas Liquor Control Board that found violations and pulled their liquor license. The Vulcan Gas Company, opened in the fall of 1967 on Congress Avenue, was the state's first true psychedelic rock venue.<sup>12</sup> Knowing they would be deliberately raided by authorities, club management did not bother to apply for a liquor license. The Vulcan Gas Company hosted various acts such the Steve Miller Band and Velvet Underground, along with local favorites Shiva's Headband and the Conqueroo.

The city and local media did not support the kind of music that was being attracted. City officials raided the club for a multitude of reasons, often citing electrical danger. Often times they pressured the owner of the building to terminate the Vulcan's lease. Additionally, local newspapers refused to promote the shows. The club had to be creative to sustain itself, once doing so through \$1 membership cards.<sup>13</sup> Although it seemed roadblocks would always interrupt the growth of the club, the music was too important. Although the specific reasons are unclear, the Vulcan Gas Company closed its doors in the summer of 1970. However, it is safe to assume it was for reasons beyond the control of staff and the loyal patrons.

The cultural relevance of the club goes beyond fostering new forms of music in Austin. The Vulcan Gas Company proved that diverse cultures and interests could co-exist. Furthermore, the preferred medium for cultural expression in the city was music.

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<sup>12</sup> Conn, Scott, director. *Dirt Road to Psychedelia: Austin Texas during the 1960s*.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

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*Broken Spoke*



*From: Tables for Ladies and Gentlemen at the Broken Spoke by Angi English*

The Broken Spoke has been a staple of the Austin music scene for half a century. The establishment has focused on traditional western music and dancing since the 1960s. James M. White has owned and operated the dance hall since it opened in 1964.<sup>14</sup> White and his dance hall have persevered through the changing dynamics in the city, never wavering from the foundation laid decades ago. I interviewed White and explored his history and relationship with the city of Austin.

“I loved honky-tonk when I was a kid. When I was discharged from the army when I was 25, I moved back to Austin. I knew I loved country music, so I decided to build the Broken Spoke,” said White when describing the opening.<sup>15</sup> The dance hall originally opened as a bar and served food, and White quickly noticed the patrons would dance to the music he played on the

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<sup>14</sup> Krause, Tanya. “BROKEN SPOKE.”

<sup>15</sup> White, James. Personal Interview. 29 April. 2020.

juke box. The pool tables were moved to make more room for dancing, and after an addition to the building space was made in 1966, the Broken Spoke became a full-fledged dance hall.<sup>16</sup>

“Those first years, things were simple. On the opening night I bought five cases of beer. Those five cases turned into ten the next night, and the rest is history.” White is sincere with his nonchalant description, saying the growth and success of the dance hall was organic and unexpected. “We served bottles of beer for 25 cents, a few years later we had to raise our prices to 30 cents a bottle. People swore they were gonna quit drinking. But they did not and they always came back,” stated White. According to White, the Broken Spoke has always had loyal patrons. The reason for consistency derives from the commitment to country music and two-step dancing.<sup>17</sup>

In the 1960s White booked local country western acts to play at the Broken Spoke. Willie Nelson performed at the dance hall for the first time in 1967. By the 1970s, the bookings began to focus on outlaw country and the anti-Nashville wave of western music.<sup>18</sup> Kris Kristofferson, Willie Nelson, and Jerry Jeff Walker played the dance hall, ushering in new fans and exciting the regular attendees. As the shift in music was happening, so were the demographics in the city. White remembers it clearly, “That’s when the hippies started to show up, and that was fine. They walked in with their overalls on and the crowds became half hippies and half cowboys. The only issue was that we had to teach them how to dance. But really, everyone got along. The music brought them together.”

The success and longevity of the Broken Spoke has no secret formula. White says the only thing he attributes it to is hard work and doing the right thing. When Willie Nelson was

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<sup>16</sup> White, James. Personal Interview. 29 April. 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

bankrupt in 1990, White's first instinct was to help out his long-time friend. White remembered, "When I heard about his trouble with the IRS, I put out a pickle jar that said 'Where there's a Willie there's a way' to help him out. People would drop a few bucks or whatever they had in and we would send it to him. The story got a good amount of attention and made us even more popular, but my only intention was to help someone out."

White noted that 2019 was their best year in sales since opening, a remarkable feat for a changing landscape. The Broken Spoke is the oldest business on South Lamar. Its neighbors have come and gone, and the dance hall has seen what was once the edge of town become a bustling neighborhood in the middle of the city. When asked about how the changes in the city have affected the dance hall, White responded, "They really haven't. We have tried to keep things the same, people only really two-step [dance] here and that's because we promote that. You will also only hear country music at the Spoke, nothing else."

White has no intention of retiring from the Broken Spoke. He loves his work, knows he is good at it, and he is straightforward about the simplicity of the operation. The dance hall's survival may seem like a mystery when so many of its peers have closed over the years. One reason may be that country western music has and always will be in style in Austin. However, countless other dance halls have disappeared. What separates the Broken Spoke is a commitment to its original values, and maybe a little bit of luck.

White's short answers about the changes of Austin and the effects on the Broken Spoke imply he never had to worry about the dance hall losing its feel. The venue aided the emergence of progressive country in Austin, while also maintaining its culture that made it a local favorite in the first place. The formula may be to ignore the changes happening around the city and focus on what made the place special in the first place. However, plenty of the Broken Spoke's peers

who stayed true to themselves were unlucky with downtown development plans and zoning. Consistent good fortune was required to keep the dance hall around this long, including a new ten-year lease in 2013 when a real-estate developer built a \$60 million dollar apartment complex surrounding near the building.<sup>19</sup>

When the lease ends in 2023, White and the Broken Spoke may face their day of reckoning. Until then, White will continue to show up every day, work for 16 hours, and make sure people are two-stepping.

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<sup>19</sup> Hall, Michael. "Saving the Broken Spoke." *Texas Monthly*.

## A Renaissance of Sound

The 1970s signified a turning point for Austin, both culturally and economically. A large majority of the workforce was publicly employed. The largest employers were academic institutions such as the University of Texas at Austin, federal employees and military personnel, and public employees for the local and state government.<sup>20</sup>

Although city and state officials' attempt to make Austin a hub for corporations focusing on technology began in the 1950s, the 70s and 80s laid the foundation for Austin to grow into the "Silicon Hills." By 1975, IBM, Texas Instruments, and Motorola had relocated significant portions of operations to the Austin area.<sup>21</sup> The following years saw technology firms follow others' lead by moving to Austin, seeking no additional state income tax and a culture of creativity. By 1985, Microelectronic Computer Consortium and Dell were primarily operating in Austin.

The 1970s saw the core of Austin's culture shift towards young adults. The federal government reducing both the voting and drinking age to 18 allowed more progressive voices to lead Austin. It also established a new generation of music fans to attend live shows and countless bars and clubs.

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*"There's a freedom you begin to feel the closer you get to Austin, Texas." - Willie Nelson*

Willie Nelson moved to Tennessee in 1960 to pursue a career in music. Following some successful singles, the young and promising country star released albums and invested his earnings into regional tours. By the end of the decade he had failed to gain traction as a country star and his tours became unprofitable. Although RCA planned to renew Nelson's contract, he

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<sup>20</sup> U.S. Department of Labor. "Area Wage Survey - December 1975."

<sup>21</sup> *IBM Highlights, 1970-1984*. IBM, 2003.



was hesitant.<sup>22</sup> Nelson was unique to the country-western industry because of his desire to explore and push the genre. He released “Yesterday’s Wine” in May of 1971, which is regarded as the genre’s first concept album. When speaking about the album in his autobiography, Nelson wrote, “I looked up and simply began asking questions. Rather than keep those questions to myself, I put them into songs.” The album never charted, pushing Nelson further into artistic isolation.<sup>23</sup> As his struggles in the music industry persisted, so did issues in his personal life. In 1970 Nelson filed for divorce, ending his relationship with Shirley Collie. Later that year, his ranch and home in Tennessee burned down.<sup>24</sup> Frustrated by the lack of acclaim and the various issues in his personal life, Nelson decided to retire from music. He relocated to Texas, eventually making his way to Austin.

Nelson is an anecdote for what attracted so many people to Austin in the ‘70s. The city was an oasis of liberal politics in the south and home to a counterculture that welcomed new ideas and rejected traditional working-class values.

Low cost of living and a slow-paced music scene encouraged Nelson to restart his career in music. There was no pressure on him to be the artist he was in Nashville. Nelson’s rebirth, and consequently that of the Austin music scene, began at the Armadillo World Headquarters. Nelson performed at the concert hall for the first time on August 12, 1972 in front of a diverse crowd of country fans and nonconformists. Nelson began work with a new studio, Atlantic Records, and released two critically acclaimed albums in 1973 and 1974.<sup>25</sup>

The rising country star embodied Austin. It was common to see Nelson performing in blue jeans, a bandana tied around his forehead, with his hair reaching his shoulders. Instead of

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<sup>22</sup> Nelson, Willie. *My Life: It's a Long Story*. 190-195.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 200-207.

<sup>24</sup> Sterlingwit. “Remember When Willie Nelson's House Burned Down?”

<sup>25</sup> Nelson, Willie. *My Life: It's a Long Story*. 210-240.

being the artist that major labels and fans in Nashville made him out to be, Nelson was able to freely express himself. Just like Nelson, the city was developing into a progressive and welcoming environment without forgoing its Southern roots.

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*The 'Dillo*



*From: Steve Hopson Photography*

After the Vulcan Gas Company closed in 1970, a vacuum existed in Austin for a live music venue that would continue to grow the emerging scene. The Armadillo World Headquarters (AWH), a new music hall that had found home in an abandoned National Guard armory, opened in August of 1970. Located on Barton Springs Road and South 1<sup>st</sup> Street, the venue had a capacity of about 750. According to the founder Eddie Wilson, the first year of operations was tumultuous.<sup>26</sup> The crowds were scarce, much remodeling was required, and the kitchen often ran out of bread to sell their sandwiches on. Open for lunch, there was a strange mix of businesspeople and ‘hippies’ who spent most of their days loitering on the property.

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<sup>26</sup> Wilson, Edwin O., et al. *Armadillo World Headquarters: A Memoir*, 67-71.

After some investment, the bar was renovated, and capacity was expanded to 1,500. Wilson announced the grand opening show featuring Freddie King in 1971. The success of the weekend stint awarded AWH the momentum to attract large crowds and better acts.<sup>27</sup> Wilson aimed to give the hippies and outcasts in town a place to escape what he described as ‘harassment.’ He did so by allowing guests to smoke marijuana at shows.

Wilson’s new venue suffered financial losses in its first year. He gives credit for the survival of AWH in the early years to their volunteer staff. The unpaid workers who saw AWH as a new home and spent most of their time there eventually found roles where they could contribute; in the kitchen, working security, or maintaining the building. There was a unique community and culture being fostered at AWH. Wilson described the venue during that time as “the chamber of commerce for the counterculture.” Not everyone in Austin appreciated what was happening south of the river. Austin’s reputation as the epicenter for ‘hippie life’ was spreading across the nation. AWH did everything but stop this movement and the migration of Austin’s newest, free-loving residents.<sup>28</sup>

The first two years of the venue expanded Austin’s culture by bringing different arts to the public. AWH hosted mime troupes, string quartets, motorcycle shows, and ballet performances. The founders of the venue went as far to create the Entertainers Information Guild, a clearinghouse where musicians could stay in contact with their friends and families while on the road. AWH and its staff had a deep commitment to care for musicians and its guests. When Shiva’s Headband lost their record deal, the staff and patrons came together to raise money to help the band put out their second album.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 59-62.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 80-90.

The operations of AWH were impractical, but it persevered. In 1972, Willie Nelson performed at the venue for the first time. If there was one identifiable moment that changed Austin's cultural trajectory, it was this show. In the late 1960s the southern roots of Austin and the emerging hippie-culture were allergic to one another. When Nelson walked on to the stage, the usual crowd was standing side by side with country and western 'rednecks.'<sup>29</sup>

AWH kept ticket prices low, often at \$2, resulting in poor promotion and struggling to honor contractual agreements with performers. The club filed for bankruptcy in 1977 following the layoff of staff member at the departure of Eddie Wilson. AWH's location became sought after for development, resulting in the landlord selling the property in 1979. The last show at the iconic venue was on New Year's Eve of 1980, headlined by local favorite Asleep at the Wheel.<sup>30</sup>

Venues in Austin during the '70s and '80s searched for cheap and open plots of land.

Unfortunately, AWH's space being redeveloped for profit became a unfortunate trend over the next thirty years.

When AWH was torn down in 1981, the steel beams from the former National Guard armory were used to build the roof of another popular venue downtown. Liberty Lunch, located on 405 W 2<sup>nd</sup> Street, would go on to host local bands and up-and-coming artists from around the country. The steel beams taken from AWH represent the lasting impact the legendary club had on Austin.

The music venue was Austin's premier cultural institution. AWH not only fostered the arts, it allowed different social groups to unite and share ideas. Washington D.C has the Kennedy Center, New York City has the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Austin had the 'Dillo. Cultural

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 119-126.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 269-272.

influence is difficult to measure, but AWH in the '70s undoubtedly changed the city. The music drove change and dictated Austin's culture.<sup>31</sup>

Throughout the decade, AWH was one of the focal points of Austin live music. The blend of rock 'n' roll, country and western, and psychedelic rock performances shaped a community with lasting impact. Today, Austin still promotes the city as a country town influenced by the progressive views of the hippie-movement. Upon landing at the Austin-Bergstrom Airport, visitors are greeted with an eclectic mix of decorations. The city has placed a combination of artistically designed boots and electric guitars throughout the airport, serving as a reminder that Austin is a *different* kind of 'country.'

When the club was commemorated by the city of Austin in 2006, Wilson said, "It is still on the lips and minds of a lot of people 26 years after it closed. This is noteworthy for me because of the zero-tolerance mentality, and now the city erected a memorial that glorifies the things of the past that are not accepted today." Wilson is stating the city is disillusioned if they believe Austin is still similar to the time when the AWH reigned supreme. Operating the Armadillo today would be unfeasible. Rent could not be paid for by cheap tickets and lesser known artists, city ordinances would limit sound, and local law enforcement may be aloof towards the club's policy on drug use.<sup>32</sup> However, the current city government, businesses, and residents still attempt to capture the culture of inclusivity, experimentation, and generosity that began at the Armadillo World Headquarters.

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<sup>31</sup> Reid, Jan. *The Improbable Rise of Redneck Rock*, 217-220.

<sup>32</sup> Long, Joshua. *Weird City: Sense of Place and Creative Resistance in Austin, Texas*, 22-41.

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*Live from Austin... It's ~~Saturday Night Live~~ Austin City Limits!*

Austin City Limits Live had humble beginnings prior to becoming the longest-tenured music series in television history. In the early 1970s, the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) pushed its local stations to create original content for unique, regional viewers. Producers for the Austin PBS station pitched an idea for a television series that would put Austin's unique music scene on display.<sup>33</sup> The set was in a small studio in the Communications building on UT Austin's campus. Tickets were first come first serve, making students wait in hour long lines to see their favorite acts. The music was earned, but people were happy to do it. The cohesive mix of outlaw country, blues, folk, rock 'n' roll, and psychedelic rock would offer viewers an unfamiliar and original sound.

The original pilot episode featured B.W. Stevenson but was scrapped due to unfit sound and video quality. The following night, October 17<sup>th</sup>, 1974, the pilot was re-shot featuring Willie Nelson. The producers did not focus on advanced production or a complex set because it would draw away from authenticity. At the time of the pilot Nelson was not a household name and remained a local folk hero. He was quiet and a bit shy when cameras started flashing, so the simplicity of the production for the pilot episode allowed him to flourish. The episode was a smash hit and PBS approved the series for a full season. The 1976 season marked a mission for the series: be marketable to nationwide audiences but focus on local and regional musicians. Performers included Asleep at the Wheel, Ray Campi, Alvin Crow, Steve Fromholz, Doug Sahm, The Texas Playboys, Townes Van Zandt, and Jerry Jeff Walker.<sup>34</sup> Kinky Friedman also taped an episode, but it never aired being deemed too controversial for public television. The

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<sup>33</sup> Laird, Tracey. "Austin City Limits: A History."

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

performance, which included songs such as “They Ain’t Makin Jews Like Jesus Anymore”<sup>35</sup> and “Asshole from El Paso.”<sup>36</sup> Lyrics that spoke about “a place where sweet young virgins are deflowered” were too racy to be aired. Pushing the envelope was a part of Austin’s culture, but apparently Friedman found the line even Austin would not cross.

Over the course of the next decade ACL Live experienced growth and popularity. However, the producers and performers did not waiver in their attempt to capture Austin’s music and culture in every show. Some of the most iconic performances from the time period were Merle Haggard in 1978, Hank Williams Jr. in 1980, and Waylon Jennings in 1985. Musicians such as Hank Williams Jr. had been rejected by the Nashville country scene, but ACL Live was not afraid to elevate the Texas legend and his peers into the spotlight.

As the city embraced music as its cultural backbone, the industry grew organically. The simplicity of ACL Live and dedication to local music proved to be a winning formula. The authenticity is what made the program, and city, special. There were no expensive marketing campaigns or efforts to grow the show as quickly as possible. Rather, producers let the music speak for itself.

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### *Home of the Blues*

For nearly the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century, the city of Houston was the hub for blues music in Texas. It was not until the 1970s that Austin made its splash in the soulful genre. On July 15<sup>th</sup>, 1975 the blues and zydeco legend Clinton Chenier performed for the opening of Antone’s nightclub.<sup>37</sup> This would be the beginning of a new era in Austin music. Nestled in the middle of

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<sup>35</sup> Kinky Friedman - "They Ain't Makin Jews Like Jesus Anymore." Youtube.

<sup>36</sup> Kinky Friedman - "Arsehole From El Paso." Youtube.

<sup>37</sup> A., Ryan. "ANTONE'S."

downtown on Sixth Street, the nightclub was prepped to go against the grain and make its mark on the music scene. Up until the mid-70s, Austin had become dominated by progressive country acts playing around the city. Antone's ushered in a new sound and influenced a re-invigorated a generation of musicians.<sup>38</sup>

Word on the new club spread after Clinton Chenier's inaugural show. Blues artists such as Muddy Waters, Fats Domino, and Albert King were ushered in to perform in front of packed crowds. Perhaps the most iconic performance came from BB King, who played during the 1976 Independence Day celebration at the club. King would go on to perform regularly at the location. As Antone's grew in popularity, so did the community that it served. Austin legends the likes of Stevie Ray Vaughan and Fabulous Thunderbirds would frequently play the club. If they were not performing that night, chances are they would be in the audience listening to their peers.<sup>39</sup>

The late 1970s marked the beginning of downtown development which caused an increase in rent prices. Although popular, the blues business was not profitable. In 1979, Antone's closed its doors. Aside from a short stint in North Austin, the club found its new home when it reopened near the University of Texas campus in 1981. As students began to flock to the new location, paired with the national success of artists who began their careers at the original location, Antone's entered its golden age.<sup>40</sup>

When Clifford Antone opened his club, he allowed the blues and jazz to migrate from East Austin into the heart of the city. Spreading his love for the blues was Antone's mission, but he accomplished more for the city than anyone could have expected. Music in Austin was defined by eras, but the reemergence of blues proved once again that different genres could

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<sup>38</sup> Karlok, Dan, director. *Antone's: Home of the Blues*. 2004.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> A., Ryan. "ANTONE'S."



coexist and thrive side by side. The late 1970s garnered Austin the reputation as a springboard for new artists and a welcoming home for struggling ones. The breadth of diversity in sound translated into the overarching culture. Austin could be a home to all, both culturally and physically.

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By 1980, the 25 to 34 years old age group was nearly double the next largest group in Austin.<sup>41</sup> A young population morphed and defined Austin's culture permanently. Rent and living costs were affordable for struggling artists, students, and blue-collar residents. This allowed individuals from all backgrounds to move to Austin, and stay. The diversity in music genres represented an inclusive culture and community that supported itself. Music artists could be heard around the city playing in front of crowds in small venues every night of the week.

Live music in Austin during this era was not just a contributor to the culture; it defined it. The customs and social institutions in Austin all surrounded the sounds played in clubs and bars around town.

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<sup>41</sup> "Community Inventory Report." 2009.

## A Little Bit of Everything

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### *Antone's on the Drag*

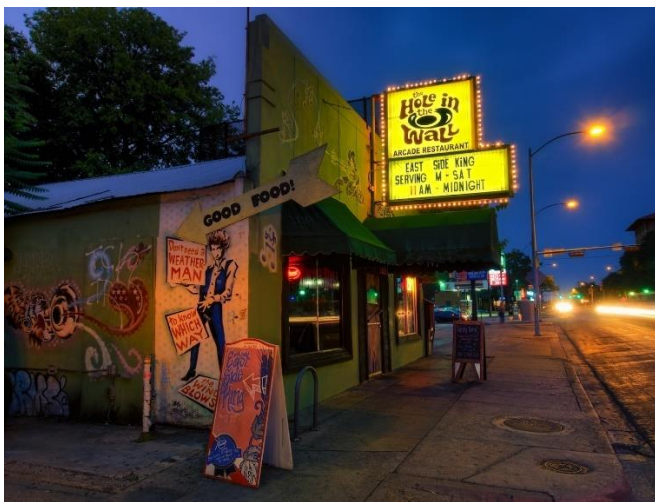
In 1981 Antone's club found a new home located on Guadalupe across the street from the University of Texas. The 1980s were the golden age for the club, stemming from a new wave of attendees that was comprised of students and blues fans alike. The club's commitment towards building a tight-knit community of artists in its early days began to pay dividends. Stevie Ray Vaughan and the Fabulous Thunderbirds had garnered nationwide fame but would still play at their favorite local spot in Austin. The blues still rang through the club, with performances occurring seven nights a week. With increased attendance and popularity, Antone's became a pit stop for artists from all around the world. In 1987, the lead singer for U2, Bono, played a set in Antone's. After his show, he stayed and performed on stage with local bands and artists including Steve Ray Vaughan.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> "Stevie Ray Vaughan Jamming with Bono at Antones in 1987." Youtube.

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*Hole in the Wall*



*From: jimnix.com by Jim Nix*

Just down the street from Antone’s on Guadalupe stood Hole in the Wall, a dive bar that quickly became a staple to the Austin music scene. Opened in 1975, the hidden gem did not find its place until the 1980s. In the 70s the bar was not meant to host musical performances, but it quickly became a hangout for local musicians.<sup>43</sup> Billie Cugini, who owned the bar up until 1998, began to allow artists to perform because they were attending so often. Austin legends Blaze Foley and Townes Van Zandt were frequent customers of the bar in the late 70s and early 80s. Two artists played every night of the week, with bookings focused on rock and folk. Local act Timbuk3 regularly played at the Hole in the Wall, and after charting a top 20 hit in 1986, would still frequently play at the dive. According to Cugini, the band would be listed on the marquee under a fake name because the bar’s 200-person capacity could not hold everyone who wanted to watch.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Park, Erinn. “HOLE IN THE WALL.”

<sup>44</sup> Curtin, Kevin. “Groover’s Paradise.”

In terms of prestige, Hole in the Wall was the little brother to clubs such as Antone's. However, the informal atmosphere made it special. Stevie Ray Vaughn would stop by to play an occasional set, along with the Texas Tornados and The Reverend Horton Heat. Due to the proximity to the University of Texas and ACL Live's original studio, musical guests of the show would often visit for a drink or occasionally even play a set after their tapings. A photograph of Emmylou Harris casually playing on the crammed stage after one of her ACL Live appearances in the 80s exists.<sup>45</sup>

In 1992, Mojo Nixon was performing his song "Don Henley Must Die" at the Hole in the Wall. Mid-way through the song, Don Henley, the drummer and vocalist for the Eagles, emerged from the corner of the room and joined in on the tune.<sup>46</sup> Why was a member of one of the best-selling bands of all time hanging out at the Hole in the Wall? The short answer is 'who knows.' The long answer is what made the bar and Austin special in the first place. The bar did not have the self-awareness to create a rare atmosphere seldom found in modern times. The lack of big-name bookings, grungy décor, and cheap drinks attracted guests and musicians alike. The Hole in the Wall did not try to be anything, it just was.

The academic world still lacks an empirical measurement for cultural impact. One of the best proxies may be the presence of memories and stories that outlast their characters. In the case of the Hole in the Wall, the abundance of unique experiences serves as a reminder that economic impact and cultural relevance do not always go hand in hand. The bar embodies what so many claim to be their favorite part of Austin; an easy-going environment that welcomes all walks of life. Despite impact, Hole in the Wall has struggled to create meaningful profit and sustain itself since its opening.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Curtin, Kevin. "Don Henley Must Die."

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*Cactus Café*

The Cactus Café opened in 1979 in the Texas Union, commonly used for open-mic night and students' bands playing cover songs. It was not until the 1980s that the listening room, with a capacity under 200 people, became a coveted place to perform in the Austin community.

Townes Van Zandt, a local legend and godfather of Texas folk, performed at the venue often during the decade. In a 1992 interview, Van Zandt noted that the welcoming atmosphere of the Cactus Café was one of the places he developed his unique sound.<sup>47</sup>

Griff Luneberg took on the responsibility of booking acts in 1982 after spending some time serving behind the bar as a student. The first performer Luneberg booked was Nancy Griffith, the future star who at the time was relatively unknown. Longtime fans and attendees of the listening room attribute Luneberg to nurturing the careers of artists such as Robert Earl Keen, Butch Hancock, and Lyle Lovett. In an interview, Lyle Lovett shared that his first shows as a headliner were at the Cactus Café.

The Cactus Café serves as an additional example for Austin being a launchpad for musicians. The listening room put the music first and the success occurred naturally. The musical environment that allowed so many artists to learn about themselves as musicians and refine their talents derived from pure love for the art. Like Austin at the time, the Cactus Café did not place pressure on its guests to be a certain kind of person or musician.

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<sup>47</sup> Bernier, Nathan. "Cactus Café Turns 35 Podcast."

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*Liberty Lunch*

Liberty Lunch opened in 1975 primarily as a restaurant, but by the 1980s had become a fixture in the Austin music scene. Originally a lumberyard, the space underwent little transformation before hosting live shows. In 1978, the *Austin-American* profiled Liberty Lunch. When writing about the founders and the influence of the club, the author wrote, “As founders of Liberty Lunch..., the two have been part — if not a cause — of a minor social revolution in Austin.”<sup>48</sup>

The early years of the club brought together various genres from around the city. Latin bands that usually performed outside of downtown were booked and brought in hundreds of listeners. The salsa band Beto y Los Fairlanes performed every Thursday at lunchtime, drawing a crowd that would dance in the sun, regardless that it was the middle of the workweek. Many of ‘hippie’ patrons who attended the Armadillo World Headquarters earlier in the decade flocked to Liberty Lunch.<sup>49</sup>

In 1979 ownership changed hands, and as a result a stage and roof were built. The roof was built with steel beams from the recently demolished Armadillo World Headquarters. Former Mayor of Austin Kirk Watson, who attended Liberty Lunch long-before holding office, stated, “I kept thinking ‘What’s the big deal about a roof?’ But since it came from the Armadillo, there was a sense that the torch had been passed to Liberty Lunch.”<sup>50</sup>

After the roof was built, the club lost many of its attendees. The AWH generation was turned off that it was less of an open space, so the owners shifted a portion of the bookings to the

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<sup>48</sup> Corcoran, Michael. “End of the Century: Liberty Lunch July 31, 1999.”

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

emerging folk genre and the slew of fans it brought in. By 1982, Lyle Lovett, Townes Van Zandt, and Nanci Griffith were regulars on the stage. The club still committed to offering a diverse sound by routinely booking various reggae acts. Louis Meyers, a former booking agent for Liberty Lunch gave credit to Waterloo Records and journalists for promoting lesser-known acts.<sup>51</sup> Meyers remembered the time as a “communal era,” with support for the venue coming from the entire local music community.

As the decade roared on, Liberty Lunch booked any artist they thought a few hundred people would come and watch. Punk rock, alternative, folk, Latin, and even rap took the stage.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

## End of the Golden Age

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### *South by Southwest*

Staff members at the Austin Chronicle in the mid-1980s who possessed a love for music and the arts were fans of the New Music Seminar in New York City. They began talking in the office about the possibility of extending the festival in New York to Austin to capture a broader audience. An agreement with the festival for the spin-off failed to realize, so Roland Swenson decided to start an independent music festival with other Chronicle staff members and a booking agent.<sup>52</sup>

As the inaugural South by Southwest musical festival was planned, founders enlisted local and regional acts to perform and participate in discussion. Austin and its residents saw the festival as an opportunity to showcase the best Austin had to offer. To the staff's surprise, 700 guests registered on the opening day, four times what was expected. The inaugural event occurred in 1987, with fans and visitors from around the country enjoyed 177 artists perform on 15 different stages.<sup>53</sup> The festival was deemed a resounding success and it had the green light to begin preparations for a second year.

The second year expanded to 415 artists across 27 stages, with performers traveling from around the country. Attendees, having heard of the first year's success, traveled to Austin in groves. By its second year, the festival was a spectacle that was talked about around the country and in the music industry around the world.

Although the inaugural year showcased local talent, the festival was poised to accomplish much more than celebrating Austin's music and culture. Booking headliners and keynote

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<sup>52</sup> "History: SXSW Conference & Festivals." SXSW, 2020.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.



speakers from around the country, including Bob Guccione from New York in 1988, signaled that South by Southwest was not about introducing Austin to the world. Contrarily, the festival was a showcase of the country's music industry that used Austin as its hospitable host.

It only took six years for South by Southwest to expand into other forms of media. In 1994 the staff introduced film and media into the lineup, organizing two film premiers and panel sessions with multi-media executives.<sup>54</sup> By 1996, panels included technology and even the video game industry.

The festival's rapid growth in popularity in the 90s drew thousands of guests. At its core, South by Southwest was a festival, formatted as a conference to allow artists to meet and perhaps collaborate. In 1994 when the festival expanded outside of music, the original mission was lost. Austin was a 'groover's paradise,' but only for a week out of the year. The demand for hotel rooms outpaced the supply, resulting in some hotels doubling their rates during the March event.

Young artists, fans, and people aspiring to work in the industry were compelled to attend, but affordability quickly became an issue. Nevertheless, the staff never pumped on the breaks. The consequence is the festival become inaccessible to those who cannot afford to pay hiked prices for travel, room, and tickets. Even young artists, who were originally targeted to attend, were forced to sacrifice their limited budgets to be a part of the festival.

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*Sixth Street Yacht Club*

In 1988 Richard Glasheen decided to open the Sixth Street Yacht Club at 515 East Sixth Street. He would go on to operate the bar for three years, closing during the recession in 1991.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

Glasheen was interviewed to offer a perspective on music and business ownership during the late 1980s and early 90s.

Glasheen's entrance into the service industry was a new adventure for him. When asked what compelled him to open a bar, he stated, "probably a character flaw, but I hate to say that. I was in my 20s and part of that was living on 6<sup>th</sup> street. There was an empty lot with a pile of bricks from a building that had burned down, so I decided to lease it." After obtaining a lease from the city, Glasheen built bathrooms, storage space, and a floor with the rubble.<sup>55</sup>

The bar was designed to be an open-air beer garden and host musical acts. Glasheen stated, "every night we were open we had bands playing. Every band would only play originals, and it was so easy to find them." Nearly every performer was local, and he remembers that often the bands would just walk up and ask to play. There was no cover charge and bands never asked to be paid, but they accepted tips. "We encouraged our patrons to tip the band, and sometimes they made a lot. But really, tips are all they needed. Rent was so cheap the bands could pay expenses for the month with a few shows in one week.," said Glasheen.<sup>56</sup>

Bars and venues during this time period did not have to advertise shows. Glasheen remembers, "Sometimes the bar was completely empty, and someone would start to warm up for their act. People walking by would hear and literally fill the place up. The bar had a pulse and it was also fluid." The bar's success relied on the local musicians to attract guests, but most of the people downtown were already looking for music.

There was a sense of community in the downtown area that derived from a diverse population. Glasheen stated, "We had every kind of guest. Guys from Fort Hood, UT Students, tourists, and our regulars. But by the end of the night, every single kind of person was dancing

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<sup>55</sup> Glasheen, Richard. Personal Interview. 1 May. 2020.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

on top of the tables.” When asked about what Austin was like during his years of ownership, Glasheen answered, “fast, free, loose, and cheap.”<sup>57</sup> The Sixth Street Yacht Club eventually closed due to financial struggles brought on by the 1990-1991 recession. However, the bar’s story serves as an anecdote for the unique time in history.

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*“Live Music Capital of the World”*

**ITEMS FROM COUNCIL**

- 46. Approved a Resolution declaring the City of Austin the Live Music Capital of the World. (Councilmember Michael “Max” Nofziger and Mayor Bruce Todd)**

*From: Austin City Council Archives*

Austin had garnered a reputation for its flourishing live music industry during the 1980s. At the same time, affordable housing slowly began to disappear, and real estate prices and rent was increasing. By 1984, median living costs in Austin exceeded the national average.<sup>58</sup> Musicians, business owners, and city officials had failed to have an open-line communication to address the concerns.

In 1981, the Texas Music Association was created to support musicians and the music industry within Texas. At the helm was Ernie Gammage, a University of Texas alumnus who studied finance and was also a songwriter. The newly formed organization began working with the Austin Chamber of Commerce to form a strategy on how the live music industry could capitalize on the city’s economic growth.<sup>59</sup> David Lord, a member of the Chamber of Commerce, wrote an article in the Austin Business Journal arguing that music in Austin does more than

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Shank, Barry. *Dissonant Identities: the Rock'n'roll Scene in Austin, Texas*. 200.

<sup>59</sup> Shank, Barry. *Dissonant Identities: the Rock'n'roll Scene in Austin, Texas*. 199.

attract tourists. He successfully earned the attention of other Chamber members by arguing the live music industry influences the general economic development of Austin.<sup>60</sup> In response, the Chamber of Commerce created the Austin Music Industry Council in 1989 and the Austin Music Advisory Committee. When describing the Austin music industry at the time, Gammage stated, “here in Austin, we grow the oats, and the rest of the country takes these oats, these raw materials, and turns them into Cheerios.” To the Chamber of Commerce, it was important that Austin did not lose its ‘soul,’ and that soul relies on music.<sup>61</sup>

Efforts included bringing MTV’s show “The Cutting Edge” to Austin and showcase live bands. The televised event in part promoted the diversity of music in Austin, as the popularity of country had declined.<sup>62</sup> The efforts to nurture the music industry had succeeded. By 1990 some Austinites claimed the city had the most live music venues per capita in the world. Although there is no definitive data or study to back the claim, it grabbed the attention of city government officials.

The Chamber of Commerce’s efforts to support the local industry were not reciprocated by the local government until 1991. City Councilmember Max Nofziger proposed that Austin should adopt a slogan that captures its most important asset, music. On August 29, 1991, the City Council voted and approved “Live Music Capital of the World” to be the city’s official slogan.

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The lack of other cultural institutions in Austin allowed music to continue to dictate the culture during the ‘80s. Music was the lifeblood of the city, and it could not be escaped. The examples outlined in this section establish a trend of establishments opening as restaurants and

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<sup>60</sup> Shank, Barry. *Dissonant Identities: the Rock'n'roll Scene in Austin, Texas*. 200.

<sup>61</sup> Shank, Barry. *Dissonant Identities: the Rock'n'roll Scene in Austin, Texas*. 210.

<sup>62</sup> Shank, Barry. *Dissonant Identities: the Rock'n'roll Scene in Austin, Texas*. 206.

bars, with no concrete plans that include music. Eventually, music finds its way into these places and never leaves. Musicians and fans alike seemed to dictate where they wanted to perform or listen.

The city was unified during this era and there was a strong sense of community. The pride that long-time residents carry is partially attributed to the ideal that they built the city together. The connectivity that existed is prevalent through the same Austin musicians playing at various venues across town. Someone who frequented one venue received many of the same experiences that others had elsewhere. Although they may have never step foot in the same room, two people could be connected through the impactful and formative memories.

Perhaps most importantly, a love for the art of music flowed through Austin. Residents, artists, and venues alike shared a common interest. Fans expressed this by seeing multiple shows a week, artists supported one another at shows, and most venues refused to charge expensive cover fees. In all the anecdotal examples, from Clifford Antone to Mark Patz, no one cites profitability as a motivation to enter the business. Low cost of living can receive some credit, but the rest goes to passion.

### **Dawn of the Information Age**

Austin's economy recovered after the short-term recession in the United States in the late '80s. By the end of the millennium, the city solidified itself as one of the world's technology centers. Corporations such as Intel, Motorola, and Computer Sciences Group expanded operations and established campuses around the city.<sup>63</sup> The city's ability to attract large players led *Fortune* magazine to name Austin "the best city for business in America." Higher paying jobs and downtown development led Austin to have the highest wage growth out of any large city in the United States. According to census data, median household income grew by nearly 35% from 1989 to 1999.

Growing Austin's economy was a bipartisan effort by city and state officials. Although development was not progress for the sake of progress, the city set precedent that economic growth would not take the backseat to other issues, be it social or environmental. Many development projects, particularly the building of corporate campuses for technology companies, faced protest from local environmental groups. However, city officials consistently found ways to negotiate and compromise, ensuring Austin would continue to attract companies.

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#### *Demolition of Liberty Lunch*

By the late '90s, Liberty Lunch was an icon in the Austin music scene. However, the famous music venue was still leasing the precious downtown land from the city government. The lot, which was highly sought after by real estate developers, was in walking distance from both Town Lake and the state capital building. The city had recently negotiated with various large corporations to move operations to Austin. In effort to convince Computer Science Corporation

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<sup>63</sup> Staff, Journal. "Austin Took off in 1990s." *Bizjournals.com*.

(CSC) to relocate, the city promised a piece of downtown real estate for their offices. Mayor Kirk Watson and the city council came to the decision to sacrifice Liberty Lunch and lease the space to CSC.<sup>64</sup>

The public outcry in response to the decision cited Liberty Lunch's importance as a cultural center. In a column for the *Austin Chronicle*, Raoul Hernandez wrote, "And as with any building of cultural and historical significance -- in any city -- *you do not tear down landmarks!*" City officials were not forced into this decision. In fact, when asked about taking the lease from Liberty Lunch, CSC stated they had not sought out the property or even considered it.<sup>65</sup> In contrast, city officials offered the property to CSC, upon which they agreed to move to Austin.

As previously mentioned, Mayor Watson frequented the Liberty Lunch years before his career in politics. Watson had personally experienced the cultural relevance of Liberty Lunch, and yet he was instrumental in its closure. Although city officials are antagonized, they were Austinites before becoming politicians. So, what happened in the '90s that led so many to prioritize economic growth over cultural and historical preservation? There is no evidence of pressure coming from the state-level and the city had already cemented itself as a hub for technology. The ambiguity contributes to the frustration held by long-time Austin residents. Decisions such as tearing down Liberty Lunch were not supported by the wider community.

Despite protest from journalists, Austin, residents, and musicians, the city finalized an agreement with CSC. On July 31, 1999 Texas bands Toadies and Baboon played Liberty Lunch's last show. Just one month later, a demolition crew began tearing down the walls, but more importantly, the decades of precious memories. Johnny Walker, a DJ for the local radio station KLBJ, stated, "It's sad that we're losing it. It seems like once again we're tearing down a

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<sup>64</sup> Rice, 100.

<sup>65</sup> Hernandez, Raoul. "You Do Not Tear Down Landmarks." *Music - The Austin Chronicle*.

paradise and putting up a factory, all in the name of progress, and I think we might be moving in the wrong direction.”<sup>66</sup> In 2020 there is still a Facebook group named “I Still Miss Liberty Lunch.” Fans and former patrons reminisce about their favorite shows and moments at the venue. Mark Patz, the former co-owner of Liberty Lunch, stated, “These people aren’t just mourning the loss of Liberty Lunch. They’re mourning the loss of their town.”<sup>67</sup>

The city of Austin recognized the vitality of the music industry through resolutions such as declaring the city the “Live Music Capital of the World.” However, city officials proved these were empty words. In the two decades from 1980 when the Armadillo World Headquarters was closed to 2000, famous Austin landmarks such as Sound Exchange, Inner Sanctum Records, the original Antone’s, and the Black Cat Lounge suffered the same fate as Liberty Lunch. Music drives Austin’s culture and culture relies on social institutions. The city disregarded the public’s voice and chose growth over protecting these various musical landmarks. Consequently, Austin was left with nowhere to foster community and culture.

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### *Austin Aqua Festival*

The Austin Aqua Festival began in 1962 as an initiative by the Austin Chamber of Commerce to attract tourists during the summer. Starting as a cultural celebration in East Austin, the festival eventually moved to Auditorium Shores and focus on music. By 1990, the festival lasted two weeks in August and was booking names such as Chuck Berry and Joe Walsh.<sup>68</sup> However, Aqua Fest still was concerned with showcasing local artists, film, and other aspects of the culture.

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<sup>66</sup> Rice, 101.

<sup>67</sup> Parker, Mike. “When Liberty Lunch Was the Place.” *Statesman*.

<sup>68</sup> Maas, Jimmy. “What Ever Happened To Aqua Fest?” *KUT*.



Ernie Gammage, who was previously mentioned as a champion for the Austin music industry in the '80s, became the executive director of the festival in 1993. At the time, the city was supporting the festival with resources and financing. However, Aqua Fest began to struggle due to increasing booking costs and lack of tourists. The city of Austin had become a year-round attraction, so convincing out-of-towners to visit in the hot August month became more challenging.

Instead of coming up with a strategic plan to reshape and revitalize the festival which had a rich 30-year history, the city pulled all its support. Gammage and the rest of the staff were subsequently fired, and their offices emptied. Without funding from the city, Aqua Fest could not support itself financially.<sup>69</sup> In 1998, the festival was shut down permanently.

Austin in the '90s had an unprecedented economic success at the cost of cultural activities and institutions. There was no plan to replace or foster these establishments, leaving the city in cultural limbo. The message was clear, if profit was not a priority, Austin was not a place to be.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

## Entering the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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### *Austin City Limits Music Festival*

In 2002, Charlie Jones and Charles Attal, who would go on to found C3 Presents, decided the ‘Live Music Capital of the World’ needed a world-class music festival. Taking the name and original mission of the Austin City Limits television series, the founders set out to plan a two-day festival in just four months. The festival was named Austin City Limits, often abbreviated to ACL. Taking place in Zilker Park, two-day tickets were sold for \$45 and the festival featured 67 artists on five stages. Although Ryan Adams, Wilco, and Los Lobos were booked as headliners, the remaining lineup was primarily comprised of local and Texan musicians such as Gary Clark Jr., Bob Schneider, and Asleep at the Wheel. The expected 25,000 attendees turned into 42,000 by the end of the weekend. A resounding success, Austin City Council unanimously approved the festival for a second year.<sup>70</sup>

By 2005, the festival was a three-day event, selling passes for \$105 and drawing in nearly 100,000 attendees. Much like Austin, the music festival was growing at an astronomical pace. Due to complaints filed by neighborhood organizations, the festival had to cut daily capacity by 10,000. In 2005, the high number of audience members caused Zilker Park’s grass to become dirt, eventually entering the air and causing difficulty to breathe.

The festival’s budget became dedicated to high-cost headliners, placing local acts on the backburner. Over the years, local musicians were slowly assigned to time slots earlier into the day and offered a lower proportion of booking fees. It took less than five years for the festival to

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<sup>70</sup> Laird, Tracey. “Austin City Limits: A History.” *PopMatters*.

lose sight of highlighting local talent. ACL began to mirror major festivals such as Lollapalooza and Coachella.

ACL roared on, and in 2012 the price of a weekend pass hit \$200. The following year, Austin City Council unanimously approved the festival being expanded to two weekends. The two-weekend event in 2015 welcomed 450,000 attendees. That same year the festival generated an economic impact of \$277 million for the city of Austin.<sup>71</sup>

An article in the *Austin Monthly* from October 2017 states that “nothing captures Austin’s music driven spirit than two fall weekends in Zilker Park.”<sup>72</sup> Aside from the fact that people are listening to music, the festival is the antithesis of Austin’s famous music scene and culture. ACL fails to promote Austin’s artists and musical history, but rather importing acts from all around the world. The lineups have become dominated by hip hop, electronic, and alternative music, failing to represent the history of blues, jazz, country western, and rock. The festival has come to represent a culture of over-spending and exclusivity. Including travel and boarding, the cost of attending the weekend festival is about \$1000.<sup>73</sup> That equates to a month of rent for the average American.

If the music festival is the epitome of Austin’s current live music scene, it fails to resemble the past. A city’s culture is defined by the social activities its residents participate in. It is problematic when the main social activity is only accessible to the wealthy. Austin City Council cited the increase in economic impact when approving capacity expansions and the two-weekend format. However, this primarily benefits the hotel industry and production companies. The opportunity for small, local vendors to capitalize on visitors exists, but so do the negative

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<sup>71</sup> “ACL Music Festival Economic Impact.” *Austinparks.org*.

<sup>72</sup> Rcord. “Why ACL Music Fest Still Matters.” *Austin Monthly Magazine*.

<sup>73</sup> Cochran, Shawn. “Austin City Limits.” *How Much Does Austin City Limits Cost?*

effects on the local music industry. Statistical analysis regarding the effect large music festivals have on local music venues revealed a negative relationship.<sup>74</sup> ACL and Austin were included in the study, and the results displayed a relationship between festivals and local venue “foreclosure, dampening competition, or increased barriers to entry.”

At a cultural level, large festivals fail to foster a sense of community. If culture is based on a set of beliefs and attitudes within a community, a soulless cluster of privilege in Zilker Park has a negative impact. Moving into the second half of the decade, city officials and powerful businesses lack awareness for cultural impact. Culture naturally develops through equitable opportunity and interdependent values. The festival’s values are profit maximization and hyper-growth.

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*Downtown Development*

The City of Austin states, “The Downtown Austin Plan captures and develops the community’s vision for Downtown.” The word ‘community’ describes a small portion of Austin’s larger demographic. The rapid and aggressive expansion of the business district benefits commercial real estate firms and high earners looking for residential living in which rent averages nearly \$3000 per month. As prices rise, small businesses and diversity are extinguished.

Austin City Council adopted the Downtown Austin Plan on December 8, 2011. The first page cites a journal on the importance of downtown in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, stating, “if we are to have public places of public expression, we need a downtown.” It goes on to say, “if a community is going to embrace diversity instead of hide from it, celebrate diversity instead of deny it, then that has to take place downtown, it ain’t gonna happen anywhere else.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Hiller, Scott. *Exclusive Dealing and Its Effects: The Impact of Large Music Festivals on Local Music Venues*.

<sup>75</sup> “Downtown Austin Plan.” *Ordinance No. 20111208-093*.



Examining the five affordable housing options in downtown, two of the buildings listed are luxury apartments.<sup>77</sup> One of the two, the AMLI on 2<sup>nd</sup>, has a monthly rate starting at \$2,290.<sup>78</sup> Not only did the city completely fail to ensure affordable housing downtown, they falsely advertise the breadth of their options. Whether it is a mistake or deliberate, the message is clear, there is zero effort to expand the downtown demographic beyond the wealthy.

In 2010, 7,413 people lived in downtown Austin. The current estimate is now over 12,000. If a downtown is as essential to culture as the city plan states, the influx of new residents belonging to a single demographic comprised of wealthy and mostly white people undermines what has been created in previous decades.

Live music is the leading title for section AU-4, alluding to the cultural importance it has in Austin. The plan states, “the City should take a proactive role in incentivizing both retention and creation of cultural facilities and live music venues.”<sup>79</sup> The proposal includes bonuses for developers constructing live music venues and the establishment of cultural districts in the downtown area. Under one image in the section, the caption reads, “the Red River live music district is at risk of being displaced by redevelopment.”<sup>80</sup> Ironically, the city is in control of approving all building and development permits for downtown. If changes occur, city officials have placed their stamp of approval on them.

Since the plan, various bars have opened in downtown that have music. However, they are not to be confused with an institution that fosters Austin’s historic music culture. From my experience, most performers are electronic DJs that you would find in any bar on a Friday night across the country. The city successfully fostered nightlife in downtown, especially on 6<sup>th</sup> street

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<sup>77</sup> Austin, Northshore. “Northshore Austin.” *Luxury Downtown Austin Apartments*.

<sup>78</sup> “Floor Plans & Pricing.” *1 & 2 BR High Rise Apartments Downtown Austin*.

<sup>79</sup> “Downtown Austin Plan.” *Ordinance No. 20111208-093*.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

though street closures. However, bachelorette parties and college freshman searching for bars that will accept their fake IDs fail to positively sustain and develop culture.

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*Attempting to Close the Cactus Café*

In January 2010, the University of Texas issued a press release stating the Cactus Cafe, located in the Union Building, would be shutting its doors after a 30-year run. University officials gave no prior warning to their abrupt announcement. Citing budget cuts, the closure of the famed listening room would save the state-funded university \$66,000 per year.<sup>81</sup> A New York Times article written about the proposed closure stated, “The closing of storied music sites, often accompanied by protest, fund-raising and other exercises in futility, has become a recurring spectacle in this growing city.”<sup>82</sup>

As the Cactus Cafe was placed on death row, longtime patrons and a small group of students started Friends of the Cactus Café. The non-profit organization was dedicated to saving the beloved listening room. After nearly two months of protest, the University was still looking for solutions to appease upset fans and a strict state budget. After failed attempts, Student Affairs Vice President reached out to Stewart Vanderwilt, the director of the University’s public radio station. KUT and University administrators came to an agreement.<sup>83</sup> Although the Cactus Legend Griff Luneburg was dismissed of his duties as manager, the listening room was approved to stay open. Although still unprofitable, it appears the university learned the Cactus Café is a force to be reckoned and should find budget cuts elsewhere.

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<sup>81</sup> Freehill, Lynn. “Encore for the Cactus Cafe.”

<sup>82</sup> Brick, Michael. “A 'Live Music Capital' Is Hearing Less Music These Days.” *The New York Times*.

<sup>83</sup> Freehill, Lynn. “Encore for the Cactus Cafe.”

In spite of the closure ultimately failing, the attempt to close the Cactus Café is a troubling anecdote. University and state officials decided \$66,000 outweighs cultural and historical relevance. If cultural and social institutions are ‘non-essential,’ then what is actually essential? Without culture, a city is simply a space for residents to earn their paychecks and go home. There is no point in co-existing if people cannot share their passions and dreams with one another.

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Austin becoming a common stop for the biggest names in music shifts the local industry closer to that of Dallas or Houston. Marketing becomes more difficult for smaller artists and venues, one problem being large events occupying space in the Life and Arts section of newspapers. Music fans are also forced to operate on stricter entertainment budgets if they desire to attend large shows.

Opened in October 2012, Circuit of the Americas is world-class racing track that hosts Formula1 races and other popular motorsport events. The site was also built to host high-capacity musical performances. Over the past eight years, the racetrack has produced concerts for P!NK, Imagine Dragons, and Justin Timberlake.<sup>84</sup> These high-cost events exacerbate the issues already created by Austin City Limits Music Festival.

**Fig. 4 Comparison Metrics: Austin MSA vs. Musician Survey Respondents – All Income Sources**

<b>MUSICIANS: ALL SOURCES OF INCOME, Pre-Tax 2013:</b>	
More than <b>20.5%</b>	Are Below 2014 Federal Poverty Level of \$11,670 <sup>9</sup>
More than <b>50%</b>	Qualify for Section 8 Housing Subsidies <sup>10</sup>
Approx. <b>75%</b>	Are Below the Austin MSA Area Mean Annual Wage <sup>11</sup>
More than <b>62%</b>	Are Below the Austin MSA Area Median Annual Wage <sup>12</sup>

<sup>84</sup> “Home of the World Championships.” *Circuit of The Americas*.



*From: 2015 Austin Music Census*

Although the city is creating higher revenue than ever before, it has never been harder for a musician in Austin. In 2013, 68.4% of musicians reported an annual pre-tax income of less than \$10,000 from all-music related jobs. When including all sources of income, nearly 33% of musicians live on \$15,000 or less per year and 50% are under \$35,000.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> “Austin Music Census.” *Austintexas.gov*.

## The New Norm

Bumper stickers, t-shirts, and flyers gracing the message “Welcome to Austin, don’t move here” are frequently seen around the city. A community that once prided itself on friendliness and inclusivity is turning a cold shoulder to the flocks of tourists and new residents that are pouring into the Austin area.<sup>86</sup> The feud with newcomers can be tied to the rapidly increasing cost of living and population density in downtown areas. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, housing costs take up approximately 40 percent of income in urban areas. Rent prices in Austin have increased by over 16 percent in the past five years, and approximately 3 percent in 2019.<sup>87</sup> Despite higher living costs, the city experienced a 1.6 percent decline in average hourly wages year over year in 2019.<sup>88</sup>

The State of Texas has a reputation for being an economic giant that relies on the exploration and production of oil and gas. Instead of being another home for the energy industry, Austin has continued its trajectory to becoming one of the largest technology hubs in the world. Start-ups and large corporations alike, technology companies are racing to Austin. The city has been coined as the “Silicon Hills,” a reference to Austin’s terrain and similarities to Silicon Valley. As of June 2019, technology companies make up an overwhelming majority of the region’s largest employers in the private sector. Apple, Dell Technologies, IBM, and Samsung employ over a combined 33,000 people in the Austin area.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Cantu, Tony. “Austin Is America’s Fastest-Growing City: Report.”

<sup>87</sup> Yardi Matrix, *Fall 2019*.

<sup>88</sup> “Occupational Employment and Wages in Austin-Round Rock – May 2019: Southwest Information Office.”

<sup>89</sup> “Texas Labor Analysis,” *Texas Workforce Commission 2019*.

### *East Austin Development*

Some of the city's most rapid development is occurring in East Austin. The Red Bluff, a mixed-use housing development, is expected to begin construction in early 2020. Developers in the Riverside area, which was once primarily home to low-income households and students, are planning to build 4 million square feet of office space.<sup>90</sup> Additionally, the developers are constructing nearly 5,000 multifamily units in the area, with just over 10% dedicated to affordable housing. Five buildings will be torn down before construction begins, all made possible by the Austin City Council approving the rezoning request to allow this level of development. These factors make Austin one of the fastest gentrifying cities in the United States.

According to data from realtor.com, a website that tracks real estate development and housing prices, the 78721-zip code in East Austin has seen median housing prices increase by as much as 148 percent since 2014. However, the median household income in the same zip code has increased by 30 percent, a small fraction of the increased housing prices. Long-time residents can remember looking East over Interstate-35 and seeing open spaces, small and affordable neighborhoods, and a rich African American culture represented by authentic food and jazz clubs. In 2019, East Austin real estate appeals to the predominantly white, white-collar community who look for cheaper prices, proximity to downtown, and “trendy” activities.

Culture has an emphasis on collectivity manifested by particular people. The authentic restaurants, jazz clubs, and nightclubs scattered in East Austin have nearly vanished. These businesses supported African American artists and offered another source of musical entertainment that deviated from trends in country and rock. Austin is one of the only large cities to display fast-paced population growth but a decline in African American population.

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<sup>90</sup> Edgmon, Erin. “Modern Office, Retail, Hotel Project to Pay Homage to Industrial East Austin.”

According to surveys conducted by the Institute for Urban Policy Research and Analysis at UT Austin, 56 percent of African Americans who left Austin in 2014 cited affordability as their top reason to relocate. On the other end of the spectrum, only 7 percent cited departure for job opportunities.

The East Austin culture was defined by its African American population, and by 2019 most of the original residents have been displaced. There was no revitalization effort, but rather a replacement. Culture has not changed nor adapted, but rather completely disappeared. In a 2019 travel guide covering East Austin published by Lonely Planet, most of the “top” locations to visit were built in the past decade, and several since 2016.<sup>91</sup> The highest recommended music attraction is the White Horse, a honky-tonk bar founded in 2011. The Austin Chronicle described the venue as “tapped into Austin’s age-old ethos,”<sup>92</sup> a gross misrepresentation of what the neighborhood once was.

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*“I like it here in Austin. Anybody got a room?” – Keith Richards, Rolling Stones*

As Austin has grown, so has the demand for entertainment. The city government and corporations have not been shy in their attempt to fulfill this increasing demand. This translates to larger venues and higher-revenue events. The Erwin Center hosts musical acts year-round, with a capacity of nearly 17,000. Recently announced acts, including Sturgill Simpson, have sold general admission tickets for over \$100 dollars. In the fall of 2019, the University of Texas broke ground on a new arena that will seat 15,000 guests and aims to attract the biggest names in music.<sup>93</sup> Each period of Austin history can be defined by a unique, generational sound. The

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<sup>91</sup> “Top Things to Do in Austin, USA.” *Lonely Planet*.

<sup>92</sup> “The White Horse.” *The White Horse - The Austin Chronicle*.

<sup>93</sup> Barden, Melanie. “UT Breaks Ground on New Basketball Arena, the Moody Center.”

music scene is now defined by the “A-List” performers it attracts. Some of the names slated for Austin shows in 2020 include Chance the Rapper, Michael Bublé, Post Malone, and Tame Impala. Performers identify Austin as another pit-stop on the nationwide tour, drowning out emerging artists.

ACL Live, the longest-running music television series, relocated in 2011 to a new venue away from the university’s campus. The relocation provided expanded seating and had over 100 shows slated for 2019. A vast majority of these acts stopped in Austin on nationwide tours. In 2018 the Arctic Monkeys, a world-renowned rock band from the United Kingdom, played for ACL Live in front of a live audience.<sup>94</sup> The superstars received poor reviews and criticism for their performance. Chad Swiatecki, an entertainment and life journalist, wrote a critical review of the show for the *Austin-American Statement*. He stated, “the performance was TV first” and the “festival-headliner-grade band to turn in a muddy-sounding, brief showing” earned them a “charitable three stars [review].”<sup>95</sup> The description of what is supposed to be a staple of Austin’s unique music scene differed from the shows produced in the 1970s and 80s by the Southwest Texas Public Broadcasting Council.

The Austin City Limits Music Festival has emerged to be one of the largest festivals in the nation. According to the *Austin Business Journal*, the 2016 festival had a total economic impact of \$277 million for the greater-Austin region.<sup>96</sup> Headliners and names that sell tickets come from all over the world, sometimes carrying performance fees of six figures. The lineup reserves spots for local musicians early in the day when attendance is low, paying the acts small fees and in some instances none. The official event attendance for the 2016 festival was

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<sup>94</sup> Swiatecki, Chad. “Arctic Monkeys’ ACL Taping Seemed More for the Cameras than the Fans.” *Austin 360*.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> “ACL Music Festival Economic Impact.” *Austinparks.org*.

estimated to be 450,000, with weekend pass prices surpassing \$200. Music and entertainment do not exclusively belong to the wealthy, and the ACL Music Festival has guests from all backgrounds. However, members of the Austin community, specifically the middle-class, can only budget for so much entertainment. According to the 2018 Consumer Expenditure Survey by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 4 percent of annual income is spent on entertainment. This figure equates to the average household spending \$2500 on entertainment for the entire year.<sup>97</sup> High festival prices cannibalize the music scene by inhibiting the frequent purchase of tickets to smaller shows.

Jimmy Fallon, the popular late-night television host, recorded a show in Austin on November 7, 2019. The multi-million-dollar production budget aimed to capture what made Austin unique.<sup>98</sup> His opening segment began in the Hole in the Wall, the dive bar that is still known for hosting local musicians. Every seat in the bar was filled with extras, attempting to portray the venue as a popular hangout for students and locals. Hunter McKenna, a senior at the University of Texas who was an extra in the segment, stated, “That was the first time most of us had step foot in the place [Hole in the Wall].”<sup>99</sup> Filling a historic music venue with participants who were making their first visit carries an odd sense of irony. What was once a stop for Austin’s emerging and underground artists is struggling to keep their doors open. Rumors of the Hole in The Wall shutting down circulated in 2015 after the owner, Will Tanner, spoke openly about rising costs.<sup>100</sup> Monthly rent was set to increase by 33 percent on the new lease. Although

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<sup>97</sup> Department of Labor. “CONSUMER EXPENDITURES - 2018.”

<sup>98</sup> Winkle, Kate. “‘The Energy Is Here.’ Jimmy Fallon Gives a behind-the-Scenes Look at the ‘Tonight Show’ Taping at UT Austin.”

<sup>99</sup> McKenna, Hunter. Personal Interview. 6 Feb. 2020.

<sup>100</sup> Chaudhury, Nadia. “Longtime Dive Bar Hole In The Wall In Danger of Shuttering.”

the Hole in The Wall survived the lease renewal and is still open in 2019, projections of exponential increases in real estate prices paint a dark future for the famous dive.

## Conclusion

Beginning in the 1960s, music served Austin as the primary social activity and driving force of the city's culture. It was the platform the counterculture used to express itself.

Throughout the '70s, the mixing of different backgrounds and ideas often occurred at music venues and establishments that were influenced by Austin musicians. The Amarillo World Headquarters fostered the development of Austin's progressive-cowboy culture by blending country-western with rock and psychedelia. Although different musical genres and interests differentiated each era, the love for music and attitudes of togetherness persisted through time.

As the city and economy developed into a stage of extreme growth towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were concerted efforts to grow and nurture Austin's music industry. The Austin Chamber of Commerce notably created various organizations to promote the positive financial impact and importance of music on the city.

Attempting to bolster the industry, the city of Austin officially declared itself the "Live Music Capital of the World." Although there was positive impact on tourism and attraction of popular performers, the slogan failed to support local musicians, venues, and the culture they had created. Through various real estate developments and increasing costs, historic venues began to disappear. What was once a springboard for musicians has become too costly for struggling artists. As Austin marches forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the city's music industry has shifted its focus to revenue producing, A-list events such as Austin City Limits Music Festival, South by Southwest, and the downtown location of ACL Live.

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In 2020, Austin is no longer at a crossroads like so many times before. Although the slogan is still used in marketing campaigns, Austin cannot seriously be considered the "Live



Music Capital of the World.” Decades of cultural identity were founded on the local music industry, but most of the venues that contributed to it are now gone. There are currently no strong differentiating factors between Austin’s music industry and that of Atlanta, Chicago, or other fast-growing cities.

Moving forward, Austin’s culture will not return to be influenced by music. The flow of wealth into the city is expected to continue and permit requests for dozens of new property developments in the downtown area have already been filed with the city. These factors will continue to cause rising living costs, forcing low-earning musicians to choose between poverty and another home.

I have loved every minute I spent in Austin, and despite a loss of culture, it is still my favorite place in the world. However, residents, business owners, and city officials must unite to plan an equitable future for Austin that promotes diversity in thought, background, and culture. If action is not taken, the city will continue its trajectory towards a culture that is defined only by the wealthy. It is already an uphill battle, but I believe Austin has the resources and human capital to foster a culture and economy in which everyone can participate.

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### **Biography**

John Stevens is from El Paso, Texas but spent parts of his childhood living in Washington D.C., El Salvador, and Mexico. He enrolled in the Business Honors program, Finance, and the Plan II Honors program in the fall of 2016. Outside of the classroom, he was involved in various organizations, including serving as one of Bevo's handlers for the Silver Spurs. He graduated in the spring of 2020 and plans on moving to Houston, Texas to begin his career in finance.