

# The Great 1996 Dead Austin Club Crawl

Michael Barnes



Researching a reader’s question about the exact location of the first **Soap Creek Saloon** off Bee Caves Road led us to this fantastic, half-forgotten document published by the **American-Statesman** on Aug. 15, 1996.

“The Great Dead Club Crawl” is an attempt to catalogue the music venues of Austin legend, a typically ambitious artifact of **XL**, our extra-sized entertainment section launched that year. It comes with no byline in our digital archives, but I know that **Ed Crowell** edited it. I can’t

remember if **Michael Corcoran** or **Don McLeese** contributed to it.

I showed the 1996 document to **Peter Blackstock**, one of our current music writers, who rightly observed that it needs a lot of updating and that quite a few of spots listed in the “Epilogue” have changed names and owners, some of them multiple times. Also, **LibertyLunch** and **Black Cat Club**, two of Austin’s most lamented Dead clubs, were still in operation at the time.

He also advised that I clean up the text a bit before reviving it, which is exactly what I’ve done in order to provide this snapshot of Dead Austin Clubs as viewed from 1996.

## **THE GREAT DEAD CLUB CRAWL**

It’s somewhere between the time they get their electricity turned on and when they get their Texas driver’s license that newcomers to Austin are exposed to that big Austin tradition: hearing about all the great clubs in town that they’ll never get to go to. It is not unusual, in fact, for our nouveau citizens to know that **Raul’s** was Austin’s first punk club even before they know the name of a good Chinese restaurant.

Austin loves its clubs like Idaho digs its potatoes and Dennis Rodman flaunts his tattoos. But unlike the impressionist sun around Rodman’s navel, there is no sense of permanence where great clubs are concerned.

Like the passion between two who thought they'd always be together, the legendary clubs dissolve into bittersweet remembrances.

You wonder why, if such joints as **Soap Creek**, the **Armadillo World Headquarters**, **Raul's** and **Club Foot** were so great, did they go out of business? But many a beloved saloon has crumbled under the march of time, or been sent crashing by the whipping wind shifts of "progress." Then there are the TABC, greedy landlords and just plain old burnout to contend with.

The storied Austin music scene began in 1933 (the year Prohibition was repealed), when country yodeler **Kenneth Threadgill** received the first beer license in Travis County. Threadgill's combination gas station/restaurant/nightclub was a special place that blurred class distinctions in the name of great music for almost 40 years. When the original Threadgill's closed in '72, with **Janis Joplin** among its most touted graduates, a new sort of musical melting pot was happening at an old National Guard armory near Town Lake.

Photo Missing

Armadillo World Headquarters. Notice it is not the Quanset hut at the corner of South First and Barton Springs Road so often IDd as the Armadillo. It was behind that building. Contributed by Jim Richardson

The '70s have been a much-maligned musical decade, but in Austin those were the glory days of live music because of the freewheeling Armadillo World Headquarters which hosted everyone from **Bruce Springsteen**, **Van**

**Morrison** and **Fats Domino** to ballet troupes. Owner **Eddie Wilson** called the structure that housed the venue “the coldest, ugliest building in town,” but because of the indeflatable spirit of people working together, the ‘Dillo had a big soul within its bare bones. As the reputation of this funky Austin concert hall spread and acts went out of their way to play there, the Armadillo became that rare case where the crowds sometimes drew the acts, instead of the other way around.

**Jim Franklin**, one of the club’s co-founders, summed up the AWHQ as “Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness with an address,” but that address is no more. Buildings are like people in that it’s what’s going on inside that really counts. And as in the case of the gawky teen who sits home with his integrity and humor on the night of the senior prom, justice doesn’t always pierce the surface. So the hideous one-story brick and corrugated metal structure, where hippies and rednecks sang **Willie Nelson** songs together, was torn down in 1981. Workers at One Texas Center now park their cars where **Jimmy Cliff** once sang “The Harder They Come” for an audience which had never heard live reggae music before.

The final night of this most legendary of all Austin clubs was Dec. 31, 1980, and it all ended with a cast of hundreds singing “Goodnight Irene” from the too-high stage at about 4 a.m. The last line of the ‘Dillo’s swan song goes “I’ll see you in my dreams, ” a fitting summary for all great clubs.

The reason they call them “haunts” is because it’s hard to

get a favorite club out of your mind, especially if it was a frequent stop on the coming-of-age express. Gleeful night-life vignettes come around like ghosts, appearing and vaporizing through a charmed haze.

Memories are our own personal home movies, but even as the clicking and whirring of recall's rickety projector reminds us that it's only a movie, having experienced the gamut of emotions in the confines of one of Austin's immortal nightclubs makes the film all the more interesting.

The Armadillo is far from being the only illustrious nightspot that has returned to dust: It's just the standard-bearer in our Dead Club Crawl, which we've asked various eyewitnesses to guide you through.

**1411 LAVACA ST.**

**FORMER LOCATION OF: CASTLE CREEK**

**HEYDAY: 1970-73**

"I wouldn't want to call **Castle Creek** a folk club; we sometimes had acts like **Little Feat** and **Muddy Waters**, but we were definitely a listening club. I used to go around every night and ask people to stop talking; if they didn't we'd kick 'em out. I'm a lyric freak and we had some of the best songwriters in the world like **John Prine**, **Willie Nelson** and **Steve Goodman**. Then, we also had

bluegrass players like **Earl Scruggs** and **Doc Watson**. One night Jerry **Jeff Walker** asked me if a friend of his from Florida could play for five or 10 minutes and it turned out to be **Jimmy Buffett**. He came back and played many times and just loved the place. In fact, when Buffett plays Southpark on Sept. 21, I bet you anything he mentions Castle Creek from the stage. He always does.”

**TESTIMONY FROM:** local impresario **Tim O’Connor**, who co-owned Castle Creek with **Doug Moyes** before leaving to work for Willie Nelson, whom he met at the club, in ’72.

**FOOTNOTE:** Before Castle Creek, the location was home of the **Chequered Flag**. Afterward, it housed the **Comedy Workshop**, where **Bill Hicks** was a regular.



Club Foot. Notice the Chase Tower was still that awful gold color.

Courtesy michaelcorcoran.net.

**110 E. FOURTH ST.**

**FORMER LOCATION OF: CLUB FOOT**

**HEYDAY: 1979-82**

“ **Club Foot** was an incredible place to hear music because it was both a concert hall and a nightclub. Like a concert hall, you could see from anywhere, the sound was great and the acts knew what they were doing. But Club Foot was a great nightclub, too, because there were so many places to be seen or hide out. **Brad First** was so far ahead of commercial radio when he chose which acts to champion and therefore Club Foot continually booked bands like **U2**, **R.E.M.** and the **Police** long before they got played on radio. Plus, there was such an incredible variety. The best show I ever saw there was **King Sunny Ade** — the entire crowd floated out after that one.”

**TESTIMONY FROM: Casey Monahan** of the Texas Music Office, who spent many a night at the Foot trying to decide whether he wanted to hide out or be seen.

**3023 GUADALUPE ST.**

**FORMER LOCATION OF: EMMAJOES**

## **HEYDAY: 1981-83**

“The night we closed the **AlamoLounge** (400 W. Sixth St.) on Nov. 13, 1981, we had **Butch Hancock, Jimmie Gilmore** and Joe Ely, and the very next night we opened emmajoe’s with Butch, Jimmie and Joe. It was a continuation in spirit of the Alamo, but emmajoe’s was even more like home for the musicians. Butch even built the bar, and all the Alamo regulars like **Lucinda Williams, Townes Van Zandt, Nanci Griffith** and **Bill Neely** had some input on where the stage should go and what kind of sound system we would have.

We emphasized two things at **emmajoe’s**: We were looking for original songwriters and we insisted that the crowd was quiet. Every once in a while Jerry Jeff would play and it would get boisterous, but for the most part people came to hear songs. That was what emmajoe’s was all about.”

**TESTIMONY FROM: Bobby Nelson**, who owned emmajoe’s with then-husband Martin Wigginton.

**FOOTNOTE:** That the owners were politically involved was spelled out when they named their club after activists/organizers **Emma Goldman** and **Joe Hill**.

**6317 BURNET ROAD**

**FORMER LOCATION OF: HENRY’S BAR AND**



## **GRILL**

### **HEYDAY: 1990-92**

“Henry’s attracted people who would normally never be together in a nightclub, from the barstool regulars to the **Emo’s** punks to the **Continental** dance crowd, but the atmosphere was just so relaxed. There was a feeling that **Henry’s** was the last of a dying breed of Texas clubs and everyone was there to savor the mood. Whenever you had visitors from out of town you’d take them to Henry’s to see **Don Walser** on Monday night or **Junior Brown** on Tuesday, and the pure Texas honky-tonk experience would just blow them away. Where is there like that now?”

**TESTIMONY FROM: John Conquest**, who touted Henry’s early and often in the pages of his Music City Texas.

**11306 N. LAMAR BLVD.**

**FORMER LOCATION OF: SKYLINE CLUB**

### **HEYDAY: 1950-72**

“When you’re talking about the history of country music in Austin, you’ve gotta start with the **Skyline**, which was the far north counterpart to the **Broken Spoke**. Everybody played the Skyline, from **Patsy Cline** to **Jim Reeves** to **Ray Price** to **Lefty Frizzell** — you name ’em. The

Skyline was where both **Hank Williams** and **Johnny Horton** played their last gigs. And how's this for irony? Johnny Horton married Hank's widow, **Billie Jean Williams**. Another legendary performer who played there was **Elvis Presley** (on Oct. 6, 1955). Elvis' first show in town was at the **Dessau Hall** in '54, where there were 12 people in the audience, but when he came back a few months later he was red hot and the Skyline was packed. The girls stole his hubcaps and they wrote all over his car in lipstick. Austin had never seen anything like it."

**TESTIMONY FROM:** Performer and country music history buff **Monte Warden**, who was too young to play the Skyline, but was able to retrieve pieces of the stage before they tore the building down in 1989.

**FOOTNOTE:** The Skyline building housed **Soap Creek No. 2** from 1978-80. After Soap Creek closed and moved to South Congress, the Skyline housed a swingers/sex club for a few months.



The original Soap Creek Saloon off Bee Cave Road. Courtesy [michaelcorcoran.net](http://michaelcorcoran.net)

“When Soap Creek opened, the Armadillo was king, but they only served beer over there, whereas Soap Creek served liquor, so you had a slightly more mature crowd at Soap Creek. Plus, that was where all the musicians hung out. The Armadillo had a lot of tourists and frat boys, but because Soap Creek was out of the way, with this winding, pothole-filled road to get there, you had to really want to be there.

“Tuesday nights were always cool, because that was when the **Cobras** (with **Stevie Ray Vaughan**) played. Wednesday was tequila night, at 40 cents a shot, so that was always a wild one, but the one night that sticks out the most was when the Grateful Dead was in town and their roadies dosed (sneaking LSD into drinks) everyone in the

place. I remember Johnny Winter was there and he was jamming with **Doug Sahm**, who was always there because he lived practically next door. You had to stop selling alcohol at midnight, so when five or six cops busted in at around 5 a.m. they thought they'd find all these people still drinking and they'd haul us all in. But nobody was drinking. Everybody was just tripping and so the cops had to leave.”

**TESTIMONY FROM: Kerry Awn**, who designed the calendars at all three Soap Creek locations, including No. 2 at 11306 N. Lamar (the former Skyline) and No. 3 at 1201 S. Congress.

**FOOTNOTE:** All traces of the original Soap Creek, perhaps the most beloved and character-filled club in the history of Austin, have been bulldozed and “landscaped” off the face of West Lake Hills. In fact, the original address doesn't even exist, as Soap Creek No. 1 would be in what is currently the 3200 block of Bee Caves Road. Said former owner **George Majewski**: “There are now \$200,000 condos where my septic tank used to be.”



**1206 E. 11TH ST.**

**FORMER LOCATION OF: CHARLIE'S  
PLAYHOUSE**

**HEYDAY: THE '60S**

“All the great blues players of the era played Charlie’s — **Bobby Blue Bland, B.B. King, Albert Collins** — it was steady. When they didn’t have any big-name bands from out of town, they’d have someone good locally, like **Blues Boy Hubbard**. This was where it was happening, because you not only had Charlie’s, but you had the **I.L. Lounge** right next door, then across the street was the **Derby Lounge** and next to that was the **Elk’s Club**. Then there was the **Victory Grill** a block away. Man, it was always jumpin.

“The thing that was different about Charlie’s was Charlie. He ran a tight ship. You never saw a fight, because if things looked like they might get out of hand, Charlie would take care of it. He always welcomed white people, too. At some places back then, some white folks might’ve been a little hesitant to go inside, but Charlie would be at the door saying, ‘Come on in!’ If you were coming to hear some blues or some jazz, you were all right by Charlie.”

**TESTIMONY FROM: Oscar Fresh Jr.**, who owns an auto cleaning business across the street from the site of Charlie’s.

**2610 GUADALUPE**

**FORMER LOCATION OF: RAUL’S**

**HEYDAY: 1978-1980**

“It was everything you wanted **CBGB’s** to be, but it was in Texas. And it was by campus. And it was unconnected to any other scene. The whole connection between club and clientele just seemed so unlikely, but that’s the nature of Texas music — it always finds a way to survive in strange circumstances.

“I was there in January ’78 when the **Violators** became the first punk band to play at this Mexican bar and there was such a crackle in the air that you felt like something very powerful and important was happening. Austin was so far away from the punk vortex that it seemed like we

had to invent our own ideas about what punk was. It was a very creative time. People like **Biscuit** and **Tim Kerr** from the **Big Boys** were always coming up with stuff and **Steve Marsh** and his band **Terminal Mind** were better than a lot of the touring bands that came through. Raul's was Austin proving, yet again, that its local players can hold their own with the best music from elsewhere.”

**TESTIMONY FROM: Margaret Moser**, who started covering the scene in the pages of the **Austin Sun** in the late '70s.



Vulcan Gas Company on Congress Avenue. A Patagonia store is there now. Contributed by Belmer Wright

**316 CONGRESS AVE.**

## FORMER LOCATION OF: VULCAN GAS COMPANY

**HEYDAY: 1967-70**

“Back in '67, most of the music scene revolved around the university, and the college kids wanted to hear cover songs. But the **Vulcan** was the first serious original rock 'n' roll club in Texas. The bands all knew about the Vulcan and they wanted to play there, so we had everyone from **Jimmy Reed** to the **Velvet Underground**. **Houston White** (Vulcan manager) had this policy that we would try to get as many of the blues legends as possible and so we booked **Lightnin' Hopkins**, **Sleepy John Estes**, **Big Mama Willie Mae Thornton** and Mississippi **Fred McDowell**, who played his very first show in Texas at the Vulcan. **Johnny Winter** met **Muddy Waters** for the first time at the Vulcan and they ended up collaborating on Grammy-winning records. Johnny was opening for Muddy and they each did two sets a night. The first night, the Muddy Waters band didn't see Johnny's set and they'd never heard of him so they just did a ho-hum set. The band hadn't dressed up at all — they were wearing their 'podunk gig' clothes and Muddy was singing 'Got My Mojo Working' and he was looking at his watch. But they did stick around for Johnny Winter's second set and he really lit a fire under them. The next night the Muddy Waters band was all wearing suits and Muddy had his hair done and they just blazed.

“The Vulcan ended up being choked by the weeds that were sprouting all around it. The drug culture started

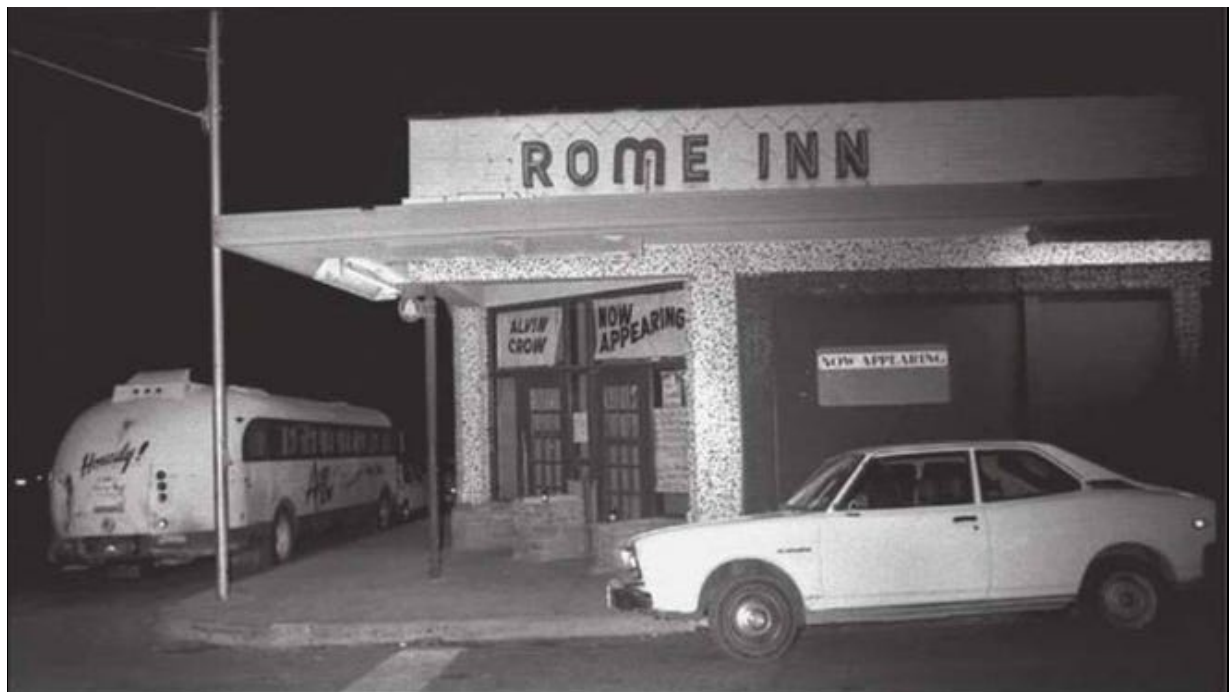


catching on to the rest of the world — not just hippies and musicians — and after a while kids were coming down to the club not for the music, but to score drugs.”

**TESTIMONY FROM: Jim Franklin**, who was the art director of the Vulcan and a co-founder and “ethereal essence in residence” of the **Armadillo World Headquarters**.

**FOOTNOTE:** Ten years after the Vulcan closed, the building was the site of **Duke’s Royal Coach Inn**, which caught a ride in the stretch between the fading of Raul’s and the opening of Club Foot.

**EPILOGUE:**



The Rome Inn is now Texas French Bread. Contributed by Ken Hoge

**THE ROME INN** (2900 Rio Grande St.), the great, late-'70s blues bar which became the punk haven Studio 29, is now a Texas French Bread.

**THE ONE KNITE** (801 Red River St.), where Stevie Ray Vaughan and a host of other blues-rockers came of age in the late '70s, is the site of Stubb's BBQ.

**THE BEACH** (2911 San Jacinto Blvd.), at which such bands as Zeitgeist, Wild Seeds, Scratch Acid and True Believers held forth, is now the Crown and Anchor pub.

**PHASES** (2222 Rosewood Ave.), the East Side R&B dance club, is now the site of the community Meals On Wheels program.

**THE CANNIBAL CLUB** (304 E. Sixth St.), which booked alternative bands in the late '80s, when they were truly alternative, is currently the site of Amazon's (a "jungle bar").

**THE SHORT HORN** (5500 N. Lamar Blvd.), which the Supernatural Family Band helped transform from a biker country bar into a groover's paradise, is now a McDonald's.

**THE SPLIT RAIL** (217 S. Lamar Blvd.) is now a Wendy's.

**THE HUNGRY HORSE** (Trinity at 18th streets), where acts like the Storm and the Nitecrawlers played while waiting for Antone's to open, is now a U.T. parking structure.

**VOLTAIRE'S** (407 Lavaca St.), which hosted such double bills as Husker Du and Butthole Surfers, is a printer supply store.

**THE BOATHOUSE** (407 Colorado St.), where k.d. lang “came out” long before that 1992 article in the Advocate, is now Gilligan’s Seafood.

**THE DERBY LOUNGE** (1113 E. 11th St.), a vintage blues and jazz club, is now an empty lot.

**THE TOP HAT CLUB** (4600 S. Congress Ave.), which introduced the lounge life to far South Austin, is still the Top Hat, but the club has been torn down and it’s now the home of Top Hat Self Storage.

**MOTHER EARTH** (914 N. Lamar Blvd.), brought straight-ahead rock ‘n’ roll to Austin in the ’70s at the site that was the original location of the Whole Foods market.

**THE JADE ROOM** (1501 San Jacinto Blvd.), one of the earliest places where the 13th Floor Elevators played, is a parking lot.

**PIGGY’S** (310 Congress Ave.), which was a stop on the early ’80’s folk circuit, was once where Manuel’s restaurant has recently expanded.

**THE I.L. LOUNGE** (11th and Lydia streets) has long been shuttered, though its form suggests it was once a glorious hotspot for the blues.

**THE NEW ORLEANS CLUB** (1125 Red River St.), which hosted some of the 13th Floor Elevators’ earliest shows, was moved about 50 yards, where its building now houses a Serrano’s restaurant.

**THE CAVE CLUB** (705 Red River St.), where Austin got its first taste of industrial music, is now the Split Rail, which is no relation to the original Split Rail.

**THREADGILL’S**: is now Threadgill’s.