

Charlyn Ziornik

Artist Franklin was the first to notice that hippies acted a lot like armadillos.

# THE ARMADILLO'S LAST WALTZ

*Farewell to the best music hall in Texas.*

**T**he Armadillo World Headquarters is almost no more. Ever since it opened its doors ten years ago it has ranked hands down as the finest popular music showcase in Texas, but in five months the former Na-

tional Guard armory will be razed to make way for a high-rise hotel and parking garage. A hundred years from now musicologists will insist that a historical marker be placed on the property. But living legends don't qualify as landmarks.

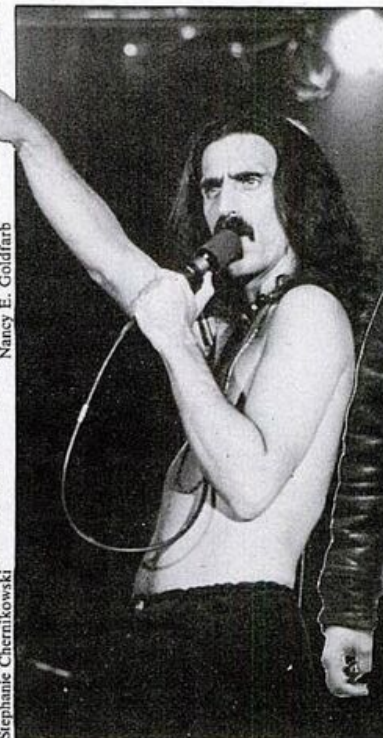
The nondescript if not downright ugly building might have been saved if it had the grande-dame facade of those vintage downtown theaters that civic groups so ardently protect. But the only architectural features about the facility that are



Nancy E. Goldfarb



Nancy E. Goldfarb



Ken Hoge



Stephanie Chernikowski



Burton Wilson



By Don

*Voices from the past (clockwise from top left): Sahn, King, Zappa, Springsteen, Morrison, and Harris.*

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really distinctive are the wall paintings of the Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers, the Guacamole Queen, and other local celebrities and the wisteria-covered beer garden out back. The acoustics aren't the greatest, either, and the place can be unbearable on a summer night because there's no air conditioning.

But other things have made the Armadillo World Headquarters synonymous with Texas and with music. Foremost is an aggressive booking policy that presents live national and local talent two hundred nights a year, with enough variety to satisfy even the most hard-core music lovers. Perhaps that statement is weighted by the fact that the Armadillo has been an integral part of my life for the past decade and we share the same eclectic tastes. It makes perfectly good sense to me, for instance, to present Bill Monroe one night and Ravi Shankar the next, Fats Domino after that, then Mighty Clouds of Joy or Jerry Jeff Walker, and then a Sunday performance of Stanley Hall's Austin Ballet Theatre. Show me another club or concert hall as adventurous as that.

I'm not sure whether my all-time-favorite night at the Armadillo was watching psychedelic pioneer Roky Erickson share the stage with country-pop crooner Freddy Fender and hometown rocker Doug Sahm, seeing a young Jersey kid named Bruce Springsteen for a dollar, watching Emmylou Harris open a show for Commander Cody, hearing the jazz of avant-gardist Ornette Coleman performed by his former associates Old & New Dreams, or listening to Dexter Gordon blow sax like it was meant to be blown. Or maybe it was hearing Van Morrison, or Captain Beefheart, or the Clash jamming with Joe Ely.

I first visited the Armadillo one afternoon in 1971. The cavernous building had been operating under the Armadillo aegis for a year, but it still had the look of a work in progress—as it has ever since. It initially opened as a larger version of the Vulcan Gas Company, Austin's Fillmore-style bastion of psychedelia. But there was something different about the Armadillo. For one thing, the managers would not let the customers forget that even though they were raised on rock, their Texas roots were undeniably country and western. Bob Wills, George Jones, and Ernest Tubb were as important to the culture of the state's youth as were Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly, and Bob Dylan.

This attitude was frequently voiced by the Armadillo's burly trail boss, Eddie Wilson, a former publicist for the U.S. Brewers Association who managed to generate plenty of newsprint on the place in its early years. Texas hippies, he said, enjoyed their rock 'n' roll and marijuana as much as their California counterparts did, but like their mamas and daddies they dug their beer and hillbilly music too. He proved his point by introducing Willie

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Nelson, Waylon Jennings, Tom T. Hall, and a host of conventional country musicians to a new and surprisingly eager audience. By its third year, the Armadillo was the melting pot of country rock and the wellspring of redneck chic. Wilson hyped the Armadillo as the "world's largest honky-tonk," and there were nights he couldn't be disputed. When Commander Cody & His Lost Planet Airmen, a long-haired revivalist country band, recorded a live album there, the audience response was so raucous and constant that the applause track on the album had to be dubbed in at the studio. Similar enthusiastic responses prompted Frank Zappa, Freddy King, Doug Sahm, and Phil Woods, among others, to record live performances there as well.

Another catalyst was Jim Franklin, the balding, bearded artist who popularized the armadillo. His realistic paintings portrayed *Dasyurus novemcinctus* engaged in such strange feats as flying over highways or bursting out of blues guitarist Freddy King's heart. The Michelangelo of armadillo recognized the considerable similarities between the animal and that late-sixties anomaly known as the Texas hippie. Both were misunderstood creatures that survived in a hostile environment. They had hard outer shells to fend off predators, Franklin noted, but they were essentially peaceful. They kept their noses in the grass, slept by day, roamed at night, and shared their homes with others. And both thrived in Texas.

More Lone Star beer was sold at the Armadillo than anywhere else save the Astrodome, and the ecology-minded Wilson was responsible for bringing back the recyclable longneck (although long-necks were never served in the Armadillo, since they made handy weapons). But the same attitudes that lent so much charm to the place created many of the problems that continually plagued it. Genuine rednecks and hippies didn't always get along. The Armadillo quit serving Lone Star in 1974 in protest of the brewery's sponsorship of armadillo races, which the staff contended was cruel treatment of the

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animals. Scuffles in the hall cropped up sporadically, coming to a violent head in 1975 when staff artist Ken Featherston was killed by a pistol-wielding patron who had mistaken him for a bouncer. Though the folks at the Armadillo brought a wider audience to Willie Nelson, they finally got fed up with some of the members of Nelson's coterie, who carried their outlaw image to the extreme. An irrevocable split between the two factions occurred in 1972, after the Armadillo helped to promote the pivotal Dripping Springs concert.

Worst of all, the loose, communal method of operating the place was ineffective. In November 1976 Wilson stepped down, and three months later the Armadillo filed for bankruptcy. It probably would have folded then if not for the efforts of a lanky, Lincolnesque musician named Hank Alrich. He recapitalized the company, pared down the staff, and continued to operate on a shoestring. The image of the Armadillo as the cradle of country rock and Texas hip lost some of its luster, but Alrich made the facility work by booking more frugally and by confining musical risks to aesthetically satisfying acts like jazz artists Anthony Braxton and Sam Rivers. Alrich also managed to revivify the Armadillo record label, releasing products by the Bugs Henderson Group and the Cobras and keeping the small in-house studio busy. The Armadillo was almost in the black.

But this spring, landowner M. K. Hage, Jr., who rented the building to Alrich without a lease, could no longer resist the offers for his increasingly valuable property near Town Lake, which is the hottest area for downtown revitalization. There was a small rumble of resistance; a group of people tried to halt the inevitable by unsuccessfully petitioning the Austin Planning Commission to designate the building a historic landmark. But it is probably just as well. Hippies are pretty hard to find these days, even in Austin. Alrich says he's tired of the bar business, and sacrificing one's life for rock 'n' roll isn't too appealing in the era of the shrinking dollar. And Gilley's in Pasadena now rightfully lays claim to the title of world's largest honky-tonk.

Halls like the Armadillo World Headquarters are endangered species, limited by size and finances. They can never compete with a place like the University of Texas Special Events Center for big-name acts. Franchising is the byword for smaller facilities these days. The Agora in Dallas, for instance, has other venues in Houston, Atlanta, and Ohio, enabling it to route touring bands on a circuit and to pay the bills with local hard-rock acts. Some qualities, though—like enthusiastic audiences and a staff with a genuine love of music—can't be franchised. For those reasons alone, I miss the Armadillo already. Visit it while you can. ♦

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