



Photo by Burton Wilson

FEATURES

How The 1970s Defined Austin

From Willie Nelson at the Armadillo World Headquarters to the burgeoning film and tech scene, this decade made Austin what it is today.

By John T. Davis

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Longtime Austinites are particularly fond of their former sleepy college town's history, and no decade represents a happier time — the happiest, some would say — than the freewheeling, youth-driven '70s. Austin has always been a progressive city, but this decade formed the bedrock for where we are today. We explain why.

So, you've just moved to Austin, Texas. Congratulations. Despite the increasing taxes, traffic, cedar fever, cost of housing, and not-so-infrequent outbreaks of self-importance, it's still an A-

list destination. Even the briefest inventory would list a host of desirable amenities: the lakes, the Hill Country, the skyrocketing restaurant scene, the mystic waters of Barton Springs, live music seemingly on every corner, a pedal-to-the-metal tech-driven economy, neighborhood enclaves of hipster cool, Longhorn sports fandom, and more annual festivals than you can throw a wristband at. Great stuff, huh?

Unfortunately, you missed it. The real Austin, that is.

Better to hear it from me first, because you'll hear it a lot. You won't be in town long before grizzled old farts like yours truly—scientific name, *Cootus armadillicus*—will start bending your ear about the Armadillo, the \$10-an-ounce pot, the beautiful waitresses at Les Amis, the dirt-cheap housing, the 35-cent tequila nights at Soap Creek Saloon with Paul Ray and the Cobras, the crispy tacos at “El Mat” (R.I.P. El Matamoros), and all the other gone-with-the-wind charms that embodied Austin in the glory years of the 1970s. Did I mention the \$10 pot?

Before you roll your eyes too much, it's important to understand that the template of the Austin you know today was forged by the forces that came to bear on the city during the '70s. Joe Nick Patoski, the author and music historian, has a book coming out at the end of the year, *Austin to ATX: The Hippies, Pickers, Slackers and Geeks Who Transformed the Capital of Texas*, that elaborates on that very thesis.

“The alternative outside culture is what built modern Austin,” he tells me, “starting with hippies in the '60s, the musicians who moved here in the '70s, the film people and South by Southwest and Whole Foods that followed in the '80s, and tech in the '90s. Each element flourished because of what preceded it. Music couldn't have happened without the hippies. Film couldn't have happened without the music. Tech couldn't be the economic engine that took over Austin without hippies, music, and film providing the foundation ... Pretty much everything that's happened since is tied into those basic building blocks.”

I got an earful about the scene developing in Austin early on. A native Texan, I was marooned at the University of Missouri in the early 1970s studying the arcane craft of journalism, freezing my ass off in the unaccustomed winters, pretending Taco Bell was real Tex-Mex, and trying in vain to get drunk on 3.2 percent alcohol content beer. (That's the low-alcohol beer that 18-year-olds could buy—made you pee a lot, but it didn't get you very loaded.)

Two West Texas buddies of mine, meanwhile, made a beeline to Austin and enrolled as happy-go-lucky Plan II liberal arts majors at the University of Texas. They rented a two-bedroom apartment a beer mug toss from the Tavern saloon at 12th and Lamar for \$150 a month and proceeded to carve out, as Billy Lee Brammer put it in *The Gay Place*, “room enough to caper.” They began to mail me notes and missives, the exact contents of which varied, but could be generally summed up like this:

“Hey, dude. You'll never believe it, we ran into Willie Nelson buying a six-pack of Lone Star at the U-Totem, and he told us to come check out his gig at the Armadillo tonight. Which we're gonna do after we smoke some of this lid of reefer we just scored and then we'll go check out the topless hippie chicks at Barton Springs. Wish you were here, you poor frozen bastard...”

Before long, I was. I transferred to the university in August of 1975 and began my 43-year slog toward old-codgerdom.

(Someone once asked a long-established local musician if he'd lived in Austin his whole life. “Not yet,” he replied.)

Austin was smaller, saner, and far more comprehensible in 1975. The population was a smidge over 250,000 in 1970; today, it's a little more than 950,000 and climbing by an estimated 150 people a day. The metro area, which includes Cedar Park, Georgetown, and Round Rock, is growing even faster.

In the '70s, the city proper was roughly bounded by U.S. 183 on the north side and Stassney Lane on the south. Across the river (then known as Town Lake) to the west lay a few outlier

neighborhoods; the rest was the province of ranchers and the semi-mythical breed of hardscrabble settlers called cedar choppers. The late, great Molly Ivins said the motto for South Austin should be “A Great Place to Buy Auto Parts.” Uber-trendy today, South Congress was home to feed stores, junk shops, and lots of junkies and ladies of the night. The then–San José Motel was a hot-pillow joint that, it was said, rented rooms by the hour. The foreboding barrier of I-35 walled off the black and Hispanic neighborhoods of East Austin, which is a shame because you could get an amazing plate of migas at Cisco’s or slip into a blues joint like the IL Club, Ernie’s Chicken Shack, or Charlie’s Playhouse. While terra incognita to most white college students, the communities were alive with black and Chicano activism. The Brown Berets, personified by activist Paul Hernandez, protested powerboat races at Festival Beach, which helped set the template for future protests against symbols of environmental racism on the East Side. There was the frequently aflame Holly Street Power Station and a sprawling petroleum tank farm that leaked dangerous chemicals into the local groundwater, which inspired the formation of other activist groups like PODER (People Organized in Defense of Earth and her Resources). Brown and black protesters joined forces to address looming gentrification, the Ku Klux Klan, and police shootings.

The economy was predicated on state government (then entirely run, as it had been for nearly a century, by Democrats); the complex of higher education institutions, including UT, Huston-Tillotson, St. Edward’s, and Concordia; and the federal payroll that bankrolled Bergstrom Air Force Base. The arrival of IBM in 1967, followed by Tracor, Texas Instruments, and Motorola, represented the first seedlings of what would become a mighty forest of tech industries 30 years later.

It was a young person’s town—not just the students, but also the state workers, the flyboys from Bergstrom, and the growing influx of artists who all gave the city a youthful cast, which still

resonates.



Photo courtesy Austin History Center

Young people played a major role in changing the complexion of the city for keeps—literally. Thanks largely to the lowering of the voting age to 18 in 1971, people of color like Richard Moya, Wilhelmina Delco, and John Treviño began showing up on the commissioners court, the school board, and City Council. The so-called “Hippie Mayor,” a 30-year-old former UT student activist named Jeff Friedman, was elected in 1975, making him the youngest mayor in the city’s history. As most cities at the time were, Austin was riven by factions supporting and opposed to the Vietnam War. The Capitol grounds and UT’s campus were the scenes of massive antiwar protests and marches.

Then another seismic, age-related event occurred in 1973—the drinking age in Texas dropped to 18. The number of clubs catering to the new clientele—most of them featuring live music—exploded.



Antone photo by Nicholas Russell

The capital city had always had music venues, dating back at least to 1852 with the Austin Saengerrunde German singing society. Eighty-odd years later, Kenneth Threadgill's Depression-era gasoline station out on the Dallas Highway, as North Lamar was referred to back then, became the creative home to Janis Joplin, a UT coed who played her autoharp and sang "Silver Threads and Golden Needles." There was a Chitlin' Circuit stopover on the East Side called the Victory Grill, opened by a World War II vet named Johnny Holmes, and the Skyline Club, a classic roadhouse north of town where Hank Williams played his last gig. Honky-tonks like the Broken Spoke and Big G's were a staple.

But in the '70s, there was an infusion of rock clubs like the One

Knite and Mother Earth, singer-songwriter hotbeds such as Castle Creek, Soap Creek Saloon, lovingly known as the “honky-tonk in the hills,” and many more. In 1975, Clifford Antone took over an old department store space across from the Driskill Hotel on Sixth Street and birthed Antone’s, his eponymous and enduring “Home of the Blues,” thus beginning a run that continues to this day. Once a run-down stretch of Mexican beer joints, shoeshine parlors, haberdasheries, and boarded-up storefronts, “Dirty Sixth” is today an entertainment destination in part because of the late club owner’s vision.

Here’s the thing—two pivotal developments during the decade in question cemented Austin’s image. One was the broadcast debut, in 1976, of the music series Austin City Limits, on the city’s PBS affiliate KLRN (now KLRU). More on that in a minute.

The preceding watershed moment came on Aug. 7, 1970, when a handful of visionaries opened a hulking, abandoned ex–National Guard armory on Barton Springs Road that they re-christened Armadillo World Headquarters.

In its decade-long, up-and-down history, AWHQ became—accurately or not—virtual shorthand for the entire Austin music scene. It was envisioned as an incubator for all the arts, including art galleries, a recording studio with video production facilities, live theater, dance, etc. But it was as a music venue that it achieved its enduring fame.

The bookings at the ’Dillo were breathtakingly eclectic, from Count Basie to Frank Zappa to Parliament/Funkadelic to Bill Monroe and His Bluegrass Boys to a skinny kid from Jersey named Bruce Springsteen, who made his AWHQ debut in March of 1974 with local western swing band Alvin Crow and the Pleasant Valley Boys as his opener.



Photo by Watt Casey Jr.

But the most consequential booking in the Armadillo's history occurred on Aug. 12, 1972, when a guy named Willie Nelson appeared to play before an eclectic crowd of snuff-dipping rednecks, hippie girls in granny dresses, blue-haired Presbyterian church ladies, and agreeably stoned UT potheads. Willie was a Nashville songwriter of much renown, although he couldn't get arrested as a concert headliner outside of Texas. But as soon as he saw the musical and cultural fusion happening in Austin, he knew he had found a home.

"Being a natural leader," Nelson told biographer Bud Shrake, "I saw which direction this movement was going and threw myself in front of it."

The late singer-songwriter Steven Fromholz summed the scene up nicely for the Austin Chronicle some years back: "You had rednecks and you had hippies and they were all there for one reason: They loved to get loaded and listen to music and we were doing something they all liked. It was kind of crazy."

Willie didn't snap his fingers and spark the musical fusion of country, rock, blues, and folk that became known by the singularly clumsy monikers of "progressive country," "redneck rock," or "cosmic cowboy." But he, along with the likes of Asleep at the Wheel, Jerry Jeff Walker, Michael Martin Murphey, and Ray Wylie Hubbard, came to embody it, and the Armadillo was Nelson's launchpad. (As the '70s waned, hippies in cowboy boots yielded to sharp-dressed cats and kittens who shook their tail feathers to the R&B grooves of Stevie Ray Vaughan, the Fabulous Thunderbirds, Lou Ann Barton, and more.)

More than anything, the Armadillo created an instant community. Imagine being the only long-haired boy or bohemian girl in, say, Lufkin or Beeville or Muleshoe. It's small-town Texas in the '70s and you're hassled by the cops, disdained by everyone else. It's lonely. Suddenly one night, you arrive in Austin and walk into a music venue where 1,500 screaming fans are pounding Lone Star beer and raising the roof to Commander Cody and His Lost Planet Airmen. "Lord have mercy, Baby Jesus!" you exclaim in wonder, "There's thousands of us!" Just like Willie, you finally find a home.

National artists (and generous press coverage) spread the word about the rapturous, Texas-size fan reaction they received at the Armadillo and other clubs in Austin. That, in turn, helped grow the local scene. Thus, "The Live Music Capital of the World."

But it took Austin City Limits to bring the city to the world. Still going strong after 44 years, the show began as a 1974 pilot program featuring—who else?—Willie Nelson. A mere 50 PBS stations agreed to air the first season in 1976. In the years since, it has featured generations of American musical artists of consequence. Like the town it calls home, its lineup changed and grew more diverse over the years, with more music genres and artists of different stripes appearing. In early July of this year, Grammy-winning R&B star Miguel taped an episode and recounted the number of times he had watched the show growing

up and what it meant to him to be standing “on this legendary stage.”



Stevie Ray Vaughan photo by Watt Casey Jr.

The TV show (and its internet simulcasts) conveyed to viewers everywhere an idealized vision of the city, especially when it was still filmed at KLRU's Studio 6-A on the University of Texas campus, its original home. In 1999, I wrote a book, *Austin City Limits: 25 Years of American Music*, and I tried to give a sense of the allure the show projected: "Thanks to ACL, when people around the country think of the Texas capital, they don't envision billionaires like Michael Dell or pontificating state politicians. They think instead of Stevie Ray Vaughan or the Neville Brothers or Emmylou Harris playing on a hillside above a glittering skyline ... Nothing the city has ever generated, promoted, or exported has come close to creating the indelible civic identity that Austin City Limits has conferred upon its hometown."

So now here we all are in the Lord's Year 2018. Stuck in traffic together, looking for the newest Next Big Thing. But, paradoxically, for everyone who is just moving here, these are the new good old days. Every generation that arrives in Austin recalls their personal heyday as the golden era, and you, newbie, will too.

Mark this dinosaur's words: One day many years hence you'll be sitting at the bar in your favorite watering hole and the fresh-faced stranger on the next stool will innocently allude to some trendy new spot, band, or gathering.

"Aw, hell, kid," you will find yourself saying. "That don't hold a candle to (fill in the blank: your cherished and probably long-vanished club, restaurant, festival, etc). You shoulda been here way back in 2018. I hate to tell you, but you really, really missed it, amigo..."

And in that moment, you, my friend, will become a true Austinite.