

Violators Will Be Punished

BY MARC SAVLOV, FRI., SEPT. 12, 1997

In the beginning, there was music. And damn, it was yummy. Trouble was, no one seemed to know who was playing where, when. Was Janis at the Soap Creek Saloon, or the Armadillo? Cornell Hurd at the Hole in the Wall? Nah, that can't be right. Where the hell was Eddie Wilson's pager when you really needed it? Nowhere to be found -- at least not back in the mid-to-late Seventies when the Austin music scene, fueled by the Cosmic Cowboy movement and a seemingly unlimited supply of talented musicians and good reefer, broke through and rivalled the burgeoning San Francisco/Haight Ashbury/Fillmore psychotrip.

Pagers, radio spots, even semi-inspired print ads for shows were few and far between back then, and the resultant information vacuum created by too many popular venues booking amazing bills with zilch advertising almost single-handedly spawned what people today think of as Poster Art. That \$50 Frank Kozik print you've been ogling at Sound Exchange has its roots not only deep in the heart o' Texas, but also in the music explosion that rocked the Capitol City in the Seventies and made sideline superstars out of a struggling band of artists and cartoonists (frequently one and the same) that included such now-legendary names as Gilbert Shelton, Jim Franklin, Ken Featherston, Guy Juke, Danny Garrett, Sam Yeates, Micael Priest, Kerry Awn, Gary McIlhenny, Henry Gonzales, Jack Jaxon, and a few others. Twenty years later, not all of these guys are as famous as they ought to be. Twenty years later, not all of these guys are as *alive* as they ought to be, either.

While Shelton moved to San Francisco and let the Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers run amok, others hung onto Austin's nascent poster art business as long as possible, eventually forming a locally owned and operated poster art ad biz, Directions Company -- by the hippies, for the hippies. Like all good things, that fell through before too long, and the "Armadillo Art Squad" (as most of the local artists who designed posters and handbills for Eddie Wilson's Armadillo World Headquarters were known) fell by the wayside, with the artists receiving less and less money for less and less

work. The bottom, apparently, had fallen out.

Cut to the tail end of the Seventies: Punk Rawk explodes, flier art makes a resounding comeback, and Tim Stegall gets his spikey-haired clock cleaned almost daily down south in Alice, Texas. Randy "Biscuit" Turner, head Big Boy and all-around art-upstart proclaims, "Go start your own band! (And while you're at it, why not do your own fliers, too?)" By the early Eighties, Paul "Martian" Sessums, Jr. and Richard "Dicko" Mathers prick up their ears and pull out their Rapid-O-Graphs and do just that. Meanwhile, Flipshades motormouth Frank Kozik skulks around Atomic City and impresses The Artist Formerly Known as Jim Hughes with his startling ability to mimic classic EC Comics art (most notably Wally Wood). For a while, that section of Guadalupe affectionately referred to as "The Drag" is a mind-bending cornucopia of slapdash flier and poster art; Xeroxed handbills and four-color offset poster art vie for attention on every available telephone pole and lightbox. The ground itself is literally covered with flour/sugar/water-pasted exhortations to *Go! See! Do!*, shrieking at passersby in a delirious riot of gaudy shades.

Then, *suddenly*, punk dies, Kozik heads out to the City by the Bay (see accompanying story), and everyone chills out while waiting for the release of My Bloody Valentine's *Loveless*. Around this same time, the Austin City Council decides it might be a good idea to deprive a few more people of their artistic livelihood and passes an ordinance making it illegal to place posters of any kind on public property. The old work, inches thick by now, is cautiously peeled from the poles along the drag and nonchalantly tossed in the nearest dustbin. The poster art scene is again in hibernation. Beginning to sense a trend here?

These days, it's tough going for the current crop of Austin poster artists. Lyman Hardy, late of Ed Hall, has resorted to calling poster art "a fine art thing these days," and Jason Austin is desperately craving a move to the more artistically relaxed atmosphere of east of the Atlantic. Longtime scene stalwart Lindsey Kuhn has moved to more profitable shores in the Big D, and former Blondie's scion and heir apparent Craig Oelrich is pulling day shifts at Mama Mia's.

While the San Francisco poster scene has blossomed in the past few years, generating generous payoffs for Kozik, Coop, and others, our sister

scene has apparently withered and died on the vine for the third time in as many decades. Remnants of the old days remain: The interior of Danny Young's Texicalli Grill is a virtual time machine, the walls plastered with sun-faded Jukes, Franklins, and Garretts, and the Green Mesquite Barbecue is similarly themed, but all in all, you're far more likely to come across the real deal behind a record-store counter or rounding out the ambience quotient at your local brew pub. Which asks the question, "What Happened?"

The Vulcan, the Armadillo, and Beyond

THE KILLER



jerry lee lewis

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Jim Franklin

"The Vulcan Gas Company was really the first place in Texas of its kind," says Jim Franklin through a mouthful of Thai buffet. "It had light shows, music -- it was a psychedelic haven. We booked original music, no copy bands, which was the big thing at the time. The Vulcan was why I started doing poster art in the first place."

According to just about everyone involved, Franklin is the granddaddy of Austin's poster art scene. Back in the mid-Sixties, the twentysomething artist was ready to pull up stakes in Galveston and head east to New York. The Beats were strong then, hippies were just making their presence known, and Texas, Franklin thought, was a little too unappreciative of what he had in mind. Before the planned move, however, on a trip to the Gulf Coast, Franklin ran into a group of Austin artists and quickly revised his plans. Why travel all that way to the snowy climes of New York when Austin -- with a suddenly intriguing art scene of its own -- was so much closer to home?

Scrapping his original idea, Franklin came to Austin and before long found himself doing poster work for the nascent Vulcan Gas Company. "Gilbert Shelton did the original posters for the Vulcan," recalls Franklin, "but when he moved to San Francisco with the Freak Brothers, that kind of left me to fill the void. It was pretty much all left in my lap. I'd sit up all night, draw a poster, and take it to the printer. I never had to pacify anybody, and that was really one of the magical things about that time.

"[Doing music posters] was a way for me to overcome my loathing of advertising by turning the advertising around into a point of celebration rather than promotion. Celebrating the music with a piece of art." Payment was arranged by the Vulcan in the form of studio space for Franklin. "I was the artist in residence, literally, in the Vulcan building. The \$10 a week they gave me was not good enough -- even in the Sixties -- to rent a space, so they just let me live and work out of the building. I was, oh, 24 at the time, and it was cool. No bosses, we were contradicting everything, and I was making art without having to attend the University of Texas. My art was all over town. In fact, someone who was teaching art at UT told me once that there was a discussion in the faculty lounge about whether or not I had attended UT, and somebody said, 'Well, not only did he attend UT, he taught here, too.' Which of course wasn't true at all."

During his tenure at the Vulcan, Franklin hit upon an inspired idea that has followed him (and the Austin music scene itself) to this very day: the armadillo. "I had a little handbook of zoology of North America," recalls Franklin, "and it had a painted illustration of an armadillo in it. I was looking at that one day, and I thought the armadillo would be the perfect symbol for

what I was doing. So, I drew one smoking a joint for a free concert in Woolrich Park. And that's what launched the whole deal. I started drawing them and it became kind of a theme. I got responses, everyone connected with it, you know. They got the connection between the hippie and the armadillo, so I started drawing them fairly frequently and it just continues from there."

Continues is one way to put it. Checking out the eaves outside Eddie Wilson's new Threadgill's location on Riverside Drive (conveniently located on the sight of the old Armadillo World Headquarters) makes it seem like more of a community obsession. Those little, plated weasels are all over this town, their corpses littering the highway outskirts. Franklin, I think, had no idea what he was starting.

Neither did Micael Priest, who entered the scene post-Vulcan, pre-Armadillo. Priest arrived in Austin for the same reason most young people do -- to attend UT. Here, he found The Rag, Austin's underground weekly newspaper, then being published out of the basement of an abandoned YMCA on the Drag. Franklin and Danny Garrett had already tried their hands doing covers and illustrations for the mag, so Priest figured he might as well give it a shot, too. "In 1969," he says, "we had the first explosion of pop festivals, where you could see all these acts on one bill for a \$7 or \$8 ticket. There was one of these festivals outside of Dallas, which I went to, and it was there I found an issue of The Rag with a Franklin cover; it was all pen and ink with billions of armadillos from the foreground all the way to the horizon. This was a lot like the kind of stuff I'd been doing, and I said, 'Hey man, I can do that.'

"Jim Franklin was kind of the guy who showed us that you didn't have to play guitar to be a star. A lot of the early Armadillo posters that Jim Franklin did were just handbills, but there were a couple -- Janis Joplin in San Antonio and so on -- that were done with really psychedelic, mutually contrasting colors. But that was real expensive to do, and in those days they didn't do shows very often, so they could kind of afford to mount a pretty good promotion."



Micael Priest

This being 1969, everyone's memories are a little, uh, *foggy* about exact dates, but at some point that year, Franklin, Priest, Garrett, Juke, Michael Osborne, and others combined their talents and formed what amounted to the first hippie advertising agency.

"We were the first alternative ad agency, and we were all just young guys," says Priest. "The oldest guy in the company was 24, the youngest 19. We handled alternative businesses -- Oat Willie's, the Armadillo, all the underground businesses. While we set out to be the first hippie ad agency, we in fact became the first hippie savings and loan, thanks to the fact that we had to extend 90 days credit to everyone. Everybody owed us money, and eventually we went out of business. The Directions Company broke up in 1974.

"The perception all around the country," Priest continues, "was that in Austin, the art was just as important as the music. When you put the two together, it really made big, serious juju magic. That was because the audience was introduced to the act before they ever got there. Our job was

to take some of the experiences of the music into places where you couldn't hear it.

"You have to remember, at that time, most of those acts were not getting played on the radio at all. Maybe in the middle of the night, on KUT, and there would be brief stints where stations would try and do some progressive programming, but invariably they'd get slapped down by the numbers and the commercial aspect, right? "For most of its history, Austin has had incredible live music and no radio supporting it. Except for the hardasses at KUT, you know? They always managed to get some in there and boy, were they proud of it. And we owe 'em, because how else were you going to get to hear new music if it didn't get played on the radio? You couldn't go to the record store and even hope to play a sample of everything that came in. There was just too much, and even then you're the only one who gets to hear it. So the posters really made a difference, and as the media began to catch up, they weren't as necessary, but clubowners still thought they were a nice touch. And the bands enjoyed it a lot."

Art and commerce rarely mix -- this was as true then as it remains now. The money just wasn't coming in for the amount of work the artists were doing. Franklin: "At first [when I started], you're anticipating a future, you know? You get responses to the artwork, people love it, and you think that sooner or later the money's going to come your way. But then you just end up becoming aware that you're just another - and I hate to use the term -- nigger in the field."

Franklin still bristles at the less-than-thrilling monetary rewards. "After so many years of inspired creative activity, seeing no payoff from it, and finding that the few places that are willing to pay you today are only going to pay the same price that we should've gotten back in the Sixties, well, again, the artist is the nigger of the publishing business."

"As far as the advertising aspect of it," says Garrett, "it ceased to be an effective advertising medium before the show or for the venue in general a long time ago. When I started at the Armadillo years ago, there really was no way to promote a show; they didn't have much money, and there was no radio promotion. Posters were a good, cheap way to do it."

"It was something that people could relate to, because of that San Francisco connection. After the Armadillo got better off financially, the dynamic of the whole thing changed a lot - it became more cost-effective to put ads in the paper or even on the radio. But the days are long gone -- probably since, say, 1977 -- that posters were an effective form of advertising."

"Over time," recalls Priest, "it got littler and littler and skinnier and skinnier, and posters would only come out for the really big shows, and then on top of that you'd have hell just trying to collect all your money. We loved doing it and being a part of it, but after a while, it just became impossible to make a living at it."

Punk Rock & the Xerox Kids



Frank Kozik

Things fell quiet for several years. The Vulcan was long since a faded memory, the Armadillo was on its last legs, and the poster art scene seemed effectively dead. It took another musical revolution and a twisted new breed of artists to shake things up, which is exactly what happened.

Punk rock invaded not just New York and Los Angeles, but also Austin, birthing Raul's on the Drag, and bands as diverse as the Next, the Skunks, and the Big Boys. As suddenly as they had vanished, the posters were backtaped, stapled, glued, and smashed onto every available (and unavailable) surface.

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Fritz Blau, who runs the Motorblade postering company, remembers, "Postering as a punk rocker for bands I was a fanatic about. Without them even knowing about it, I would go and create a poster for the Standing Waves or the Next or whoever, and just go out and put it up on my own like a lot of idiots did back then."

Priest remembers the sudden influx of new art vividly: "About the time we all thought [poster art] was going to die, here come the Xerox kids. This was around the late Seventies, the time of Raul's and the punk rock kids. They took it to an even more homegrown level than we had, because they would make 'em themselves without any fear of ever being paid for them. They'd make five or six or 10 or however many Xerox copies they could afford with what little money they had in their pockets, and go out and staple them up just to promote the shows. And I went yeah, because it finally got back to where it started from, you know? All we were ever trying to do was get across to people that rock & roll was supposed to be a participatory sport, a spectator sport. The more people there, the better."

For want of a better term, many people -- collectors, fans, etc. -- view this late Seventies/early Eighties tumult as the beginning of "The Kozik Years" (see accompanying story). There were plenty of others working at the time, notably Martian Sessums and Richard "Dicko" Mathers, both of

whom played in the nascent Oi! band Criminal Crew and spent their days hanging out on the front stoop of Atomic City with Jim "Straight Edge" Copenhaver and Kozik.

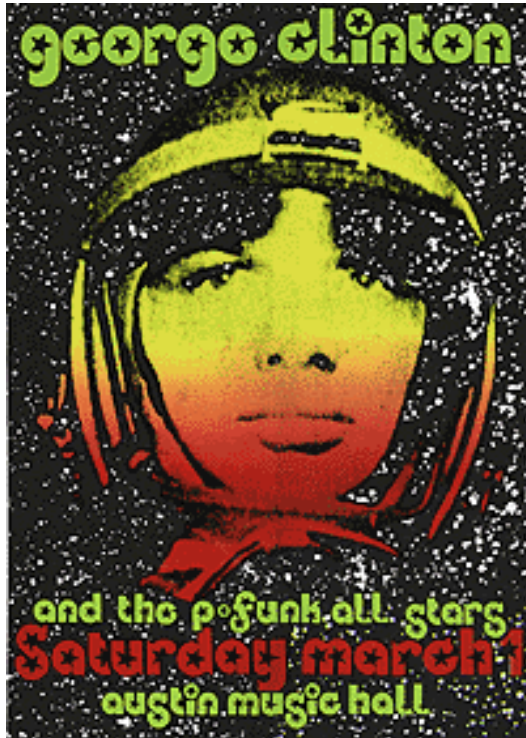
Love him or hate him, though (or both, as most people do), Frank Kozik revolutionized postering in Austin and beyond, taking it off the street and holding his work and that of his contemporaries up for validation. There was a dawning realization that this poster art could trigger some serious cash flow. It had value, merit, and above all, financial worth. To this day many people in the art community resent the fact that Kozik apparently stumbled over this seemingly obvious truism and in the process became the most successful modern poster artist anyone had ever seen.

Priest: "Kozik did the poster that got banned by UT. It was Joseph and Mary barbecuing in their aprons with the baby Jesus on the grill, and it said, 'Everyone serves the Lord in his own way.' So the University of Texas bans the poster, and they then ended up running it on the cover of the Daily Texan, distributing thousands of copies all over the world just to show everyone what they didn't want anyone to see! [laughing] That made us kind of proud of Frank.

"Through the Club Foot era, Frank and Andy Blackwood, Paul Sabal, and another fellow started the Art Maggots [a poster artist collective], and they were doing a similar thing to what we had done with the Armadillo a decade before. "To a great extent, their arrival meant that we didn't have to bust our asses and try and make a living doing this anymore because we had viable replacements now. For a long time, we probably did it because it still needed doing and there was no one else to do it. But with Martian, and Jason Austin, and those guys, when they came on the scene, it really made it fun and exciting again."

And then, towards the end of the decade, the process repeated itself, winding down under the weight of its own inertia as the Austin poster scene dried up once again -- right about the time Green Day started getting attention from people other than Lawrence Livermore (make your own judgment call on the implications...).

The Here & Now, and the Evil City Council



Lyman Hardy

This is the new skool: Lyman Hardy, Jason Austin, Craig Oelrich, Lee Bolton, Lindsey Kuhn, and a small handful of others. And this is one reason why you can't find their work on the street where, presumably, it belongs: From the Austin, TX Land Development Code, Section 13-2-864....

"No person shall either directly or indirectly cause or authorize a sign to be installed, used, or maintained on any utility pole, traffic signal pole, traffic signal controller box, tree, public bench, street light, or any other structure located on or over any public property or public right of way located within the city's planning jurisdiction, except as authorized by this article. The primary beneficiary of any sign installed in violation of this section ... shall be guilty of a violation in this Land Development Code. [Violators will be punished] by a fine not to exceed \$2,000 in cases arising under code, ordinance, or other city regulations ... or \$500 in all other cases."

"It's against the law, and they actually enforce it now," says Hardy. He's right. After passing the resolution four years ago under then-Mayor Bruce

Todd, the City of Austin has swept the streets clean of any and all poster art. Venues such as Sound Exchange and Waterloo Records are more than willing to put up a few posters in their windows, but the Drag -- once a source of some seriously collectible eye-candy -- is as barren as Tranquility Base.

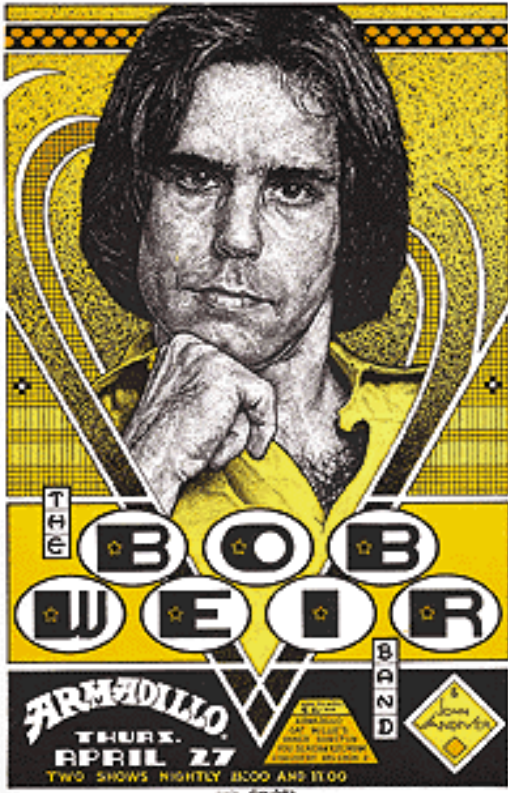
The odd thing about the clean-sweep resolution -- and one that still galls most of the poster artists involved -- was that it came mere days after Mayor Todd and others honored those same artists with certificates, lunch, and limos, proclaiming their work to "beautify the city."

"It was Poster Artist Day, and we got all these certificates for doing this thing that was allegedly against the law," recalls Hardy. "At the time, no one really brought up the fact that it didn't make any sense. I guess we were all just stoned. They had this limousine that they brought to drive all the older guys in, and so I guess they were all charged up about being in the limo and forgot to ask what was up. It was kind of weird."

The restrictions on placement of posters has been more or less of a boon to Motorblade's Blau, though, who makes it his livelihood to get posters out and maintains concise records of what can go where, how, and when. "I have all these different bulletin boards all over town, in theaters, coffee shops, bookstores, Magnolia Cafe, Kerbey Lane, Amy's Ice Cream on Sixth and Lamar, and stuff like that. I just keep my eyes open looking for places to go." And has the long arm of the law knocked Blau on his RollerBlade Co.-sponsored butt yet? "Well, no. I've never been fined, because I never put them on sign poles. I think [the enforcement] comes and goes in waves, though. They enforce the postering law really heavily in the Fall -- when kids are coming into UT -- and make sure everybody's kind of scared and that they've handed down a few fines, and that's usually enough to keep people real cautious. I mean, I don't have any proof of that, but it sure seems that way. "Also, along the Drag, there's a lot of store owners who help the police harass posterers who are doing it illegally. And a lot of store owners will just pull the stuff down from the poles, too. They help take care of the policing themselves."

According to Priest, this isn't the first time the City of Austin has passed ordinances prohibiting street art. "I want everyone to know that this is the third time they've done that," he says. "About every six years or so, they

would come along and come up with some new ordinance to bother us with. One of them was that you had to register the posts you wanted to use, and you then had to pay them in advance. For the telephone poles!"



Guy Juke

Artist and former Sincola skin pounder Terri Lord remembers the good ol' days of postering. "It would be a three-hour walk up and down the drag," says Lord. "It was entertainment, really. I never got stopped, but you know, we always took a good look around before putting stuff up. Eventually we graduated to using the PET Milk.

"I think the city council types that want to turn Austin into the next Dallas or whatever, I think they think it looks ugly, but then, I think Ben White Boulevard is pretty ugly, too. I always thought of it as a continually changing mosaic. Having been on tour to so many different cities, it shows that you have a lively cultural scene when you have a lot of posters in a certain area. Dallas, I think, passed a law against postering, and then they were inundated by people putting them on cars. I'll bet they've passed a law against that too, by now."

Jason Austin, who's recent showing at the Hyde Park Bakery drew accolades and interested (and hungry) viewers from all over town, regrets that the city's intolerance towards street art has forced himself and other poster artists into the galleries, thereby taking the art out of its natural environment.

"Over in Europe," says Austin, "posters are still a big part of advertising. And, I think if they're not used for advertising, then what's the point? That's what it's all about to begin with, you know? It's advertising on the street level where people actually see it, and that's the beauty of the art, that's how the art gets so widespread, instead of being seen just among the select few people who go to galleries. Art on the street is cool. Anyone walking down the street can see it and pay attention to it instead of having to go seek it out at a gallery. Mainly, that's what it's about: advertising on the street, free, for people to see."

As Danny Garrett noted earlier, however, the value of poster art as advertising is not what it used to be. "These days, it's more of a novelty item," states Craig Oelrich. "I think that a lot of people deem it as being almost ... not necessary, from the clubs on down. These days, it's become the sort of situation where it's less of the clubowner and promoters trying to advertise the show, because they know that it's more than likely that the bands themselves are going to provide posters for the shows, or handbills, or whatever. As long as they get the listing in the Chronicle, they're okay." Clubowners, too, are reluctant to let bands and poster artists run riot in the street. Under the city ordinance, they can get slapped with a hefty fine as well.

Eric "Emo" Hartman's club is as much a pillar of the poster art community as it is of the rock & roll ethic, but these days, Hartman explains the massive collection of posters that cover the venue's ceiling is expanding much slower than before.

"The biggest thing that I've seen," says Hartman, "even bigger than the ordinance, is that the artists themselves are leaving town, you know? They're not making any money here. Kozik lived here and I started working with him back in '91 at the Emo's in Houston. Both him and Lindsey Kuhn have left now. Everybody else kinda floats in and out. But people have a

tough time doing [poster art], and they start branching off and doing other things. Lindsey's up in Dallas with his skateboard stuff, Kozik's out in San Francisco doing his record label and whatever else he's getting into. "I don't know if it's the ordinance so much as it is the times, like a lull of sorts. Live music in town hasn't been doing that well all across the board, from the Music Hall all the way down to Jovita's or whatever. It's down all over."

Obviously, the city ordinance is at least in some ways responsible for the decline of Austin poster art, but just as likely is Michael Priest's notion that these "lulls" come in waves. There may be a decade or so between each upsurge in the success and notoriety of the poster artists themselves, but peaks and valleys like that have bugged artists since Day One. The real question is: What next? "Technology has moved on," says Priest, "and as a communications medium, the poster is no longer the best choice or the most effective. But it's now recognized to be high art, which it wasn't seen as back in the beginning. In other scenes, in other countries, in other centuries, it certainly got that way. We always kind of railed against galleries and stuff, because they usually close about the time that people with checkbooks get off work. None of our audience would ever get to see anything in a gallery, so we always ended up hanging in rock & roll halls. "I think what's going to be the next thing for us -- and I'm hoping the young cats will do this, too -- is to start doing tour shows of the posters. Like a music act, with the artists going around and talking about it.



Lindsey Kuhn

"You see, the thing that none of us really realized while we were doing this was that we had created an incredible kind of historical document. Everybody that looks at a poster has all these incredible associative experiences tied to it. We certainly do, anyway.

"No matter where it goes, though, it's going to be a very Austin progression. I mean, this town may be the biggest collection of attention-deficit-disorder kids in the world. I've always thought it was the place that had more people that 'can't help it' than any other place I've ever been. Those kinds of folks end up doing all the creative stuff; I mean they can't concentrate on anything they don't feel. So, the stuff that they do make is definitely from the heart and it's got a lot of juice in it. And if a bunch of people do this, it creates a feedback loop, and becomes more than the sum of its parts, and that's why Austin's famous, for Chrissakes."