

A Survivor's Tale: The Armadillo and the Cosmic Cowboy Way

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This article appeared many moons ago in the Austin Chronicle in remembrance of the Armadillo World Headquarters and the early years of the Austin music

scene.

A hippie history of the '60s and '70s in Austin and the emergence of an Austin Sound would have to center on the Armadillo World Headquarters. True, the Vulcan Gas Company, Soap Creek Saloon, One Knite, and others all played a part. But our first wave of honky-tonk heroes to storm the nation came via the funky old Dillo. The highest and mightiest took the Willie Way to Wall Street, and the cream of the New York social set promenaded in boots and cowboy hats. In fact, if you listen to some old longhairs, you'd think that Austin mellow played a role in nationwide reconciliation following a decade of total war between hippie and redneck, young and old.

The split was ugly, a fiercesome battle with hideous atrocities on both sides. Of course, to hear conservative revisionists tell it, the "Lost Generation" was the misbegotten spawn of hedonism, a godless bunch of Charles Manson druggies. Ronald Reagan and Rush Limbaugh share an affinity for this approach.

But *this* is hippie revisionism, which yields to the obvious, minor point: A lot of people were into the '60s just for the sex and drugs. There are obsessives for every vice—sex, booze, drugs, dogma. (It's like the drunk who says, "I know my limit. I just keep passing out before I get to it.") They're the ones who get the

press.

On the other hand, a '60s argument could be made for escaping the reality of the times. The powers-that-be weren't exactly covering themselves in glory then. Confidence in our leaders took a freefall after the Kennedys and Martin Luther King were killed and the country dug deeper into a bloody, protracted war in Vietnam. Madcaps Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew followed, then Watergate, Kent State, the My Lai massacre.

On through the '70s, a surreal series of events defined the status quo: Tricia Nixon deciding on a rose-garden wedding with her Harvard beau; Alexander Haig saying the missing 18 minutes on the Nixon tape were due to a sinister force; 20 prisoners and 10 hostages dying in the Attica Prison riot, all from police fire; Martin Luther King's mother shot to death while playing the organ in an Atlanta church; Nixon resigning, then Ford pardoning him a month later; Wilbur Mills, chairman of the powerful House Ways & Means Committee, caught cavorting in the Tidal Basin with stripper Fanny Fox; Agriculture Secretary Earl Butz saying that "blacks were interested only in good sex, loose shoes, and a warm place to defecate"; Three Mile Island nuclear plant melting down.

On the local level in the late '60s, things weren't much

better, though evidence was of a more *personal* nature. Hippies—whether revolutionary, Zen master, or couch spud—encountered hostility on most all fronts. In Austin, as elsewhere, the number-one traffic violation was driving without a haircut. At the time, according to one cop, 80 percent of the Austin police force was ex-Marine, and they didn't much cotton to all the protesting: When Abbe Hoffman spoke, 11,000 crammed into Gregory Gym. A 1970 antiwar protest drew 20,000, and tear gas wafted down Austin streets. The specter of chaos haunted the constabulary.

This behavior didn't sit well with elders, either. After a 1969 protest, Wray Weddell, columnist for the Statesman of the day, wrote, "On KOKE, country music deejay Arleigh Duff, calling the marchers 'Hanoi's Little Helpers,' mixed patriotic music with the country top 40." The Citizen, after an incident at the Chuck Wagon closed the campus hippie hangout to nonstudents, quoted assistant district attorney Herman Gotcher as saying that long-hair radicals "use that place to fornicate their desires." Dallas took notice and passed a law forbidding "lagging" or "sauntering." After a 1971 protest at the LBJ Library, a Mrs. Logan Gray was quoted as saying, "We could sleep a lot better at night if we could kill them all [the protesters]." Her husband, who showed greasepaint on his knuckles, had to be separated from a protester done up in whiteface so that

the demonstrator could be arrested.

You could get laid out in laid-back old Austin, so hippies generally kept to the center of town, huddled around UT. They didn't travel too far into north or south Austin, and they never stopped at Weedon's Sunoco on 34th—hippies and blacks weren't served.

In the university area, at least, there was strength in numbers, much to the consternation of UT officials, who did everything they could to contain the madness. In 1969, they barred a play, "Now the Revolution," from campus because of nudity. It went on with no nudity, but was shut down again because of fire laws. The next month, two employees of the UT Academic Center were fired for sporting long sideburns. That summer, the university made it illegal to enter the East Mall Fountain—to "maintain safety standards"—and banned the alternative publication, the *Rag*, from campus. But the cancer was spreading: In 1966 a third of UT coeds signed up for sorority rush; by '69 it had dropped to 17 percent. In early 1971, UT students, in a futile yet defiant gesture, voted 6,226 to 966 to dump big-dog regent Frank Erwin Jr.

Fortunately, at the time, city leaders had other fish to fry. In 1970 Austin began desegregation of its schools—a month after Wray Weddell wrote, "Pushed into a corner by HEW and the Justice Department, school

board president Roy Butler's previously mildly stated opposition to mass busing to accomplish total desegregation is now unyielding." That obviously took some working out. (Things got a little tense, there was always the Sixth Street porno theater, which was showing "Hippie Orgy" and "Psychedelic Sex.") And bidness, of course, was still bidness. R. L. Hancock, an Austin utility official, announced in 1972 that the city should buy into the \$289 million South Texas Nuclear Project, which, he said, would crank out electric in 1980. By then, the cost topped \$2.8 billion and the completion date had been rescheduled for 1984.

Still and all, Austin was better than most places. For one thing, it boasted a low threshold of survival. In 1969 and again five years later, a Department of Labor study declared Austin the cheapest city of its size in the nation. Back then, you could rent a small house for \$50 a month and eat on a dollar a day. That made it easy to follow your muse—"do your own thing," as it were—a boon to the starving artist. And word got around: From 1970 to 1973, Austin population growth of 4.5 percent a year was second in the nation.

The city's youthful core provided a defensible perimeter, and Austin soon gained a rep as an oasis of tolerance in all of Texas (as long as you minded your p's and q's and didn't go where you weren't welcome). A hippie could even get a job working construction,

something unheard-of in Texas at the time. And Austin didn't have the big-city feel, which worked out well, 'cause hippies had entered that "movin' to the country" pupal phase.

There weren't a lot of options, of course: Hippies couldn't countenance the reality presented, and reality wasn't crazy about them (unless they could pound nails). Hippies were left to find another way, an alternate reality. In the late '60s—early '70s, you might say, Austin became a city full of hippies finding themselves, finding what worked for them. This included artists, writers, musicians—the whole range of fanciful spirits—besides your ordinary-but-longhaired folks.

Then, as today, the chief medium was music, as the baby-boomer mob focused on, and coalesced around, the tunes of the time and their pumped-up ideals. A short-lived scene developed in Austin at the Vulcan Gas Company, where you could hear the likes of Conqueroo, Shiva's Headband, and 13th Floor Elevator, but it succumbed in early 1970. Still, music filled university-area garages, as every hippie who could carry a tune or fake a chord on a guitar hacked away at an "original sound" (for then, as now, Austin prized creativity). Clubs like the Jade Room, Alice's Restaurant, Chequered Flag, I. L. Club, and One Knite offered a limited number of small venues for those who

persevered.

It wasn't until the Dillo came along in the summer of 1970 that Austin could boast an alternative place large enough to bring in national touring acts and showcase promising local music. Tracy Nelson and Mother Earth opened the club in July, followed that fall by an eclectic mix, including Freddie King, Mance Lipscomb, ZZ Top, Lightnin' Hopkins, the Incredible String Band, and Doug Kershaw. Local bands included Shiva's Headband, Storm, Ramon Ramon & the Four Daddios, Hub City Movers, Wildfire, and T. Tellonious Troll.

Not much in this assemblage could be classified cowboy-western; that was yet to come. But the prevailing mood was indeed laid-back—at least in part because of a brutal summer that enforces a relaxed pace three-quarters of the year. Slowly but surely the first pioneers of Austin's parallel universe settled in, working to “get back to their roots” (the last in the trilogy of '60s banalities), whatever they may have been.

For some musicians, that meant reprising old Bob Wills standards, cryin'-in-the-beer stuff they'd been weaned on in Texas. People like the Vaughan brothers, Paul Ray, Angela Strehli, and Lou Ann Barton went with the blues, Eric Johnson explored the outer reaches of weird jazz with the Electromagnets, and Christopher

Cross sang Beatles tunes. Different strokes.

These diverse tastes in music were mirrored at the Armadillo, as its steadily expanding staff plumbed individual depths—whether in music or in other creative endeavors. The club, originally conceived as an arts project, sought to embrace numerous flights of fancy. For one, the Dillo supported a Texas terminus on the San Francisco–Austin underground-art railway, which produced front-line alternative poster artists and cartoonists like Gilbert Shelton, Jack Jaxson, Jim Franklin, and Micael Priest. Photographers such as Burton Wilson and Coke Dilworth, among others, roamed the wings recording the proceedings for posterity. The Mad Dogs—writers Gary Cartwright, Bud Shrake, and friends—contributed money to keep the club afloat and an encouraging word.

In a 1971 *Sports Illustrated* article, Shrake wrote: “Exactly why armadillos are taking hold as a youth symbol is a matter for speculation. Armadillos are paranoid little beasts who prefer to mind their own businesses. They love to sleep all day, then roam and eat all night. They are gentle, keep their noses in the grass and share their homes with others. Perhaps most significant, they are weird-looking, unfairly maligned and often picked on, and have developed a hard shell and a distinctive aroma. They do far more good than harm, and yet the usual social reaction toward an

armadillo is to attempt to destroy it.”

Over time, the Dillo developed as something of a cross between a family business (you couldn't get a job there with a résumé) and the prototype Japanese model (which meant working long, hard hours of real labor, at low wages, for the principle of the thing). It was a grand experiment in harnessing hippie energy. And it was what they made it.

With limited resources in 1971, the Armadillo again ventured far and wide, bringing in acts like Ravi Shankar, the Velvet Underground, Taj Mahal, the Flying Burrito Brothers, Fats Domino, Leo Kottke, Captain Beefheart, John Sebastian, Leon Russell, Earl Scruggs, and Jerry Jeff Walker. But a definite country tinge could be heard coming from many of the popular Austin acts playing the club, bands like Greezy Wheels, Shiva's Headband, Freda and the Firedogs, Balcones Fault, Tiger Balm, and Snaker and the Shakers. Maybe more swing, more kick, more pseudo-religioso jive—yet somehow country. And what Austin wanted to hear in 1971–72: a “progressive” country.

This home-grown music also profited from the influences of seminal Austin musicians like Steve Fromholz, Rusty Wier, Townes Van Zandt, Willis Alan Ramsey, Jimmy Buffett, and a steady influx of new names, which grew to include Jerry Jeff, Michael

Murphey, Joe Ely, B. W. Stevenson, Asleep at the Wheel, and, of course, Nashville expatriate Willie Nelson: the “cosmic cowboys.” The weight of all that talent ultimately—inexorably—commanded attention nationwide.

Willie, of course, became our first mega-star. And it was the Dillo’s Eddie Wilson and Mike Tolleson and others who sat cross-legged on the floor with Willie and talked him into appearing, convincing him that what he had was honest, and good, and that he would play well to the Armadillo audience. Which proved to be a gross understatement.

In a 1973 *Texas Monthly* piece called “The Coming of Redneck Hip,” Jan Reid wrote about a Willie Dillo show: “As remarkable as Nelson’s act that night was his audience. While freaks in gingham gowns and cowboy boots sashayed like they invented country music, remnants of Willie’s old audiences had themselves a time too. A prim little grandmother from Taylor sat at a table beaming with excitement. ‘Oh lord, hon,’ she said, ‘I got ever’ one of Willie’s records, but I never got to see him before.’ A booted, western-dress beauty drove down from Waxahachie for the show, and she said, ‘I just love Willie Nelson and I’d drive anywhere to see him, but you know, he’s sure been doin’ some changin’ lately.’ She looked around. ‘I have

never seen so many hippies in all my life.”

This became a familiar scene, as Jerry Lee Lewis and Waylon Jennings and the like followed Willie into the Armadillo, drawing a complete mix of fans young and old. Music was the common ground, a “roots” sound hippies and rednecks both could relate to.

In 1974, *Time* magazine gushed: “Rock is no longer a dirty word in Austin. Indeed, by embracing rock’s big beat, Austin’s musicians have evolved a brand-new style of country rock, and have made the city the fastest-growing country-music center in the U.S. Nashville, still the capital of country, may provide more regular work. Bakersfield, Calif., may offer the inspirational presences of Merle Haggard and Buck Owens. But from the point of view of new sounds, freedom and plain musical fun, Austin now definitely ranks as No. 1. . . . What the Fillmores East and West were to the rock era, the Armadillo World Headquarters is to Austin’s country-rock set.”

By 1976 the *New Republic* would write: “Michael Ventura, an actor and theater critic who emigrated from Brooklyn, was surprised when he discovered cowboys and hippies peacefully coexisting in the same saloon, three generations on the same dance floor, and ‘the only place outside of Harlem where the men dance as well as the women.’ Dozens of people in and out of the

music business make the point that Austin music brings different cultures together—not only cowboy and hippie but Texas booster and multinational executive, anglo, Chicano and black.”

This unique audience at the Dillo drew raves from all quarters. The common denominator was an immoderate music appreciation, and artists did everything but roll in it. Frank Zappa called the Dillo the “last really fun place to play” and recorded an album there. So too did Freddie King and Commander Cody & the Lost Planet Airmen, the band that lit Austin’s afterburners in 1972 (and that first brought Asleep at the Wheel through on tour). When Cody recorded they had to cut the audience from the final mix—it was too loud. Ray Campi perhaps put it best: “Here they’ll accept anything that’s real and good. They don’t care what it is . . . There’s an open mind here, and that’s great.”

Redneck rock would slowly fade into the setting sun (with Delbert McClinton telling us, “It sucks—and not very well”). Disco, though stillborn in Austin, would throb across the land as the country humped and bumped toward the Reagan ’80s. A new line of promising musicians would pass through the Dillo, the likes of Bruce Springsteen, Elvis Costello, the Police, Dire Straits, Talking Heads. Austin bluesers would hit the scene like a Texas flood, Eric Johnson would go

nova, and the next and the next Austin star would struggle to tune his or her guitar in the garage out back.

In the “real” world, fraternities and sororities would stage a comeback on the UT campus, leading Jackson Hooper, vice president of the Interfraternity Council, to sniff: “There seem to be less people walking around who don’t bathe. The campus in general seems to be closer to where the Greeks have been all along.”

Once again we’d begin to see what’s important in life.

Obviously, freedom means different things to different people. The Dillo brand allowed for free expression, in many more ways than one. Back before perestroika, when the Cold War still raged, the head of the Soviet news agency and his staff came to Austin. After lunch with the Capitol press corps, they spent the afternoon at progressive publication *Texas Observer* with Kaye Northcott, who then asked if there was anything else they’d like to do. The Russians said, to the utter dismay of the State Department lady accompanying them, that they’d like to check out this Armadillo place they’d heard about.

That night at the Dillo, the autumn equinox, Balcones Fault laid in a beat heavy on big-band swing—Fats Waller tunes and the like. Eight or fourteen pitchers of beer and numerous pocket flasks later, the Russians

were jitterbugging with the hippies in front of the stage.

As longtime Dillo emcee Micael Priest remembers it, “The one guy who could speak and read English pretty well was buzzing around the walls, filling up notebooks, copying people’s T-shirts, the signs on the wall and paintings, stuff like that.”

The Russkies partied the night away, losing themselves in the good times. But before leaving, finally shepherded out long after the last dog dangled, one remarked, “This must be the freest place on earth.”

The close of the Armadillo was the end of an era, but not the end of understanding. As might be expected, Austin grew into a little city *muy importante*, but at no small cost: Life’s not cheap anymore, and the livin’ ain’t so easy. Thank god, artists are a scruffy lot, able to survive on the scraps of others. Here’s to the carefree, the fancy-free: Long may they endure. For the story of the starving artist today is the story of the Armadillo World Headquarters back when—when the cosmic cowboys first rode.