

Texas Star

Austin blends Texas tradition with contemporary style

By Eric Lucas

It's a warm Sunday evening at Ginny's Little Longhorn Saloon, where Dale Watson has just finished a rendition of a rollicking roots-rock trucking tale. He leans back on his stool, rests his hand on his pearl-faced Fender Stratocaster and announces the next song.

"It's time for an old Bob Wills tune"—the crowd cheers—"and I bet it's been a while since you heard this one." Dale and his three bandmates strike up the lilting three-chord melody of *My Shoes Keep Walking Back to You*, a classic older than anyone in the band, and, in a tiny dance space, three couples begin rudimentary waltzes.

Ginny's is a quintessential music venue in Austin, Texas, the self-styled "Live Music Capital of the World." Watson is a quintessential Austin music star, a self-made purveyor of country and roots rock; Bob Wills is a Texas cultural icon; and this moment, in this place, is Austin in every way. I'd go so far as to declare it might not be possible anywhere else.

For one thing, few outside of Texas would recognize and cheer a Bob Wills song. It represents musical heritage three-quarters of a century old. And the memorably mellow atmosphere in this establishment is akin to a family picnic. In fact, nearly half of Ginny's customers on this balmy evening are outside the tiny saloon, sitting in lawn chairs, quaffing bottles of Lone Star, admiring the classic cars parked nearby and debating the prospects for the Longhorns. That's not just a heritage cattle breed, it's the University of Texas team mascot. A young lady as tall as a longhorn is long, wearing a Longhorn T-shirt, dances next to a young woman attired in red Nocona boots and a gingham folk dress. Nearby, a business exec in a pinstripe suit whirls another cowgirl clad in jeans. The bar is crowded such that you can't even see the floor but, even so, two patrons courteously step aside so I can order a Coke.

"Do you need to cool down or wake up?" someone asks me, amiably.

Like I say, quintessential Austin. But don't think Austin is only small-saloon country-rock. This same evening, five miles away in downtown's Alamo Drafthouse Ritz Cinema, alternative rock band The Calm Blue Sea is performing a live score they've written for Fritz Lang's classic 1924 silent movie *Siegfried*. The film is a Wagnerian rendition of a 13th century Germanic epic, *Das Nibelungenlied*; the music is soaring, electronic rock that thrums and rumbles, whispers and surges.

And lest you think Austin is only music, this same week engineers at Intel's Austin chip-design center have announced a ramp-up in production of a new, energy-efficient data-processing chip called "Atom." Key to the mini-laptops known as netbooks, the Atom has already been used in millions of these compact, economical and ultra-efficient computers.

"If you are a star, people expect you to do more things," the Atom team's leader tells the *Austin American-Statesman*—an assessment one might well apply to Texas' capital city itself. Cosmopolitan yet traditional, historic yet edgy, corporate and counterculture, Austin blends virtually every element one could find in Texas into a fine local gumbo. The city is at the geographical crossroads of the Texas tripartite pantheon of Houston, Dallas and San Antonio, and at the cultural crossroads of the cowboy plains to the north, the traditional Southern cotton fields to the east, and the Hispanic Southwest. That diversity is exemplified in the almost mythical annual entertainment festival South by Southwest (SXSW), which draws tens of thousands of singers, pickers, filmmakers, actors, performance artists and interactive media professionals of every kind each March.

Many people might be more familiar with Austin's long-running Austin City Limits music program, aired on PBS since 1976, and the Austin City Limits Music Festival: The three-day event, October 2–4, will feature 130 bands on eight stages.

But Austin hums any time of year.

Here, amid a vibrant metropolitan area of about 1.2 million residents, are the Texas statehouse and the 50,000-student-strong University of Texas, both Lone Star powerhouses. Austin's the gateway to Fredericksburg and the fabled Texas Hill Country (see sidebar on page 33), a beatifically pastoral region of rolling ridges, tumbling limestone streambeds and wildflower fields. And Austin hosts a high-tech industry whose firms run the gamut from Freescale Semiconductor to rival AMD; from Dell to Hewlett-

Packard to Apple; from Google to gaming giant Blizzard Entertainment.

Nature supplies the local low-tech attraction—a colony of Mexican free-tailed bats which, at 1.5 million, is roughly the same size as the human population. But the bats all reside in one spot, under the Ann W. Richards Congress Avenue Bridge, from which they pour forth every evening, April to October, to rid the community of mosquitoes. It's reportedly the largest urban bat colony in North America.

And, yes, there are on average nearly 200 live-music performances every night in the greater Austin area. That's not two dozen; it's not two score; it's two hundred, and Austin proponents say it is the largest such number, per capita, in the

country. In fact, the Austin CVB folks say they get a lot of mileage out of the city's reputation as the live-music capital of the world.

"It's an awful lot," CVB communications rep Beth Krauss tells me at breakfast at Jo's, a downtown al fresco cafe where we're working on bowls of oatmeal the size of half a basketball (things really are bigger in Texas). "Music and musicians everywhere."

One of the latter is Dale Watson's steel guitar player, an erstwhile Northwesterner named Don Pawlak. I know that because, in the middle of Watson's own *No Help Wanted*, he rips off the finest gossamer, heartrending steel solo I've heard in three decades. So afterward I tell him that. He beams and asks where I'm from. A Seattle neighborhood called Ballard, I explain.

"No kidding? What street?" I tell him. "Man, I used to live four blocks from there."

"And you moved to Austin because ... ?" I think I know the answer, but it's polite to ask.

"There's a lot more work in Austin for a steel player than in Seattle," he says. "I miss the salmon, though."

One thing Austin does not have is local salmon. No worries: The central Texas traditional repast is barbecue, a finely honed culinary art. Its Lone Star adherents believe their version—plain meat, in the form of beef brisket or pork ribs or whole chicken or handmade sausage, all cooked sauce-free, roasted for hours in the hot smoke of indigenous woods—is the only true barbecue. Sauces are served on the side. I stop for lunch at one of the city's dozen barbecue venues, Ironworks, a downtown institution in an elegant stone building, where I take a table on the outdoor patio next to a trio of business types in, yes, pinstripe suits. "What's best, gentlemen?" I inquire.

"Pork ribs, for sure," one declares.

One of his companions scoffs. "Beef ribs; hard to find 'em other places." The third fellow simply raises his eyebrows and carves a slice of sausage, as if his position is so unassailable it requires no verbal support, and the simple sight and smell of it will suffice. I wind up having the beef short ribs.

But barbecue is ubiquitous throughout Texas, and if you were to map it as though it were an earthquake, the epicenter would be Austin. I debate the virtues of various 'cue joints a few hours later with another local resident about a mile south of Ironworks, on South Congress Avenue. We've both grabbed an afternoon coffee at a local bakery, and are watching the world go by in Austin's best street scene. South Congress is a half-mile-long collection of cafes, nightclubs, galleries and shops, with street-food vendors, sidewalk buskers and thrift stores. At one of the latter, there are cherry-red boots, hats as big as cars and vintage guitars on offer in the window.

On South Congress, an especially energetic soul could start the day with breakfast at Jo's, on the patio; proceed to innumerable shops to peruse novelties such as Mexican pulp-fiction cover art; stop for lunch at Guero's Tacos, also with an al fresco option; wander some more amid clothing boutiques; indulge in a late-afternoon massage at a healing-arts center; step next door to a hair salon for a spruce-up; have dinner at Opal Divine's (poblano-stuffed, locally raised chicken breast); and follow with dessert at Amy's Ice Creams. There are at least four dozen flavors, but Amy's Mexican vanilla is nonpareil. Thus refreshed, one might head to the Continental Club for what is reputed to be one of the best late-night Texan dance scenes in town.

At the moment, though, I'm only sipping iced coffee, perusing a pamphlet mapping the South Congress district and debating barbecue with my neighbor. He favors The Salt Lick, a legendary place on the way to the Hill Country. I describe my loyalty to Smitty's Market in Lockhart, a town often labeled the barbecue capital of the world, about 30 miles south of Austin. Lockhart has two of the 2008 *Texas Monthly* Top 50 barbecue joints—actually both are in the top five. That's quite a distinction for a town of 13,600.

"Haven't been to Lockhart in years," he allows. "I live in a really nice place called South Austin. See that city up there?" He indicates the office towers of downtown Austin, a half-mile north. "Over there on the other side of the water? I hardly ever go there. Got everything I need right around here."

The "water" is Lady Bird Lake, a sparkling reservoir formerly known as Town Lake but recently renamed after one of Austin's most notable citizens. Lyndon B. Johnson's wife long outlived the former president, and she left her mark on the United States in the form of a beautification campaign largely responsible for the profusion of native wildflowers that line many of the interstate highways. Visitors can experience her legacy just outside Austin at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center (www.wildflower.org), or simply by driving around the Austin area.

Texas has many legacies, not least that of LBJ, whose 1960s Great Society is alive today in the form of Head Start, the Clean Air and Clean Water acts, the Endangered Species Preservation Act, the Voting Rights and Civil Rights acts, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Medicare and Medicaid, and food stamps—whew. As I said, Texans think big. LBJ was not only committed to bettering America, he was schooled in the rough-and-tumble

politics of Texas and poured all of his literal and intellectual weight into creating these programs. The LBJ Library, on the UT campus just north of downtown Austin, holds millions of pages of historical documents from his five-year presidency, as well as archival film footage, mementos from his presidency and honest interpretations of his tumultuous era.

Born on a hardscrabble ranch in the Hill Country an hour west of Austin, LBJ typified the Texas ethos that is described at The Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum as “guts, grit and gumption.” Focusing on heroes and icons of state history, the museum profiles figures as disparate as Charles Goodnight, pioneer cattle baron, and Quanah Parker, last chief of the Comanches. Across the street from the history museum, on the UT campus, is the Blanton Museum of Art, which holds one of the finest collections of modern Latin American art in the United States. The heart of the collection is a sample of Argentine paintings that exemplify the magical realism found in South American literature.

There are some Texas sights you won't see in Austin. There are few cowboys and no oil wells—the black gold is found elsewhere. Its heft is an Austin mainstay, however: The University of Texas' \$8 billion endowment, largely born out of oil-rich land in West Texas, is the largest of any public university's in the nation.

There's that Texas word again, “largest.” Its periodic appearance in Austin is illustrative rather than definitive, however; the capital is better described as a user-friendly small city that is both Texan and distinctive. Walking beneath breeze-ruffled shade trees in the Sixth Street downtown entertainment district on a balmy evening, I happen on Jim-Jim's Water Ice, a unique outlet for a treat that consists of fruit, ice and sweetener blended into a cooling compote. I try the mango and head down the block, where I encounter a dad with two kids. The children are lagging behind until he turns and says, “OK, we're almost there. What flavor?”

“Strawberry,” his 6-year-old girl says.

“No, mango!” her 8-year-old brother declares.

So what flavor is Austin? Let's say, barbecue ribs with guitar pick and computer chip; the side sauce is classic Texas, but the veggies are organic chile peppers. It's one of the best recipes in the country.

Seattle resident Eric Lucas has visited Texas more than 30 times.

Getting There

Alaska Airlines begins new daily nonstop service between Seattle and Austin on August 3, and between San Jose and Austin on September 2. For more information or to book tickets, go to alaskaair.com or call 800-ALASKAAIR.

Texas Hill Country

The 19th century pioneers who arrived in the Hill Country west of Austin found a rolling landscape of live oak-dotted prairies, floods of springtime wildflowers, gently tumbling streams beneath limestone cliffs, and occasionally tempestuous weather. They added cattle, rode out the hard times, and a lifestyle was born. German settlers in 1846 founded Fredericksburg, whose character remained largely steadfast for the next 150 years. It's a charming small town with quiet inns and restaurants featuring Wiener schnitzel, an hour west of Austin.

All that is still true, but Fredericksburg and its surrounding area are changing. Nine wineries dot the Gillespie County countryside; gourmet cafes and boutique shops line the city streets; and upscale hotels leaven the lodging opportunities. Sunshine-yellow roses climb stone-block walls; mockingbirds sing from rooftops. It's one of Austin's most appealing getaway destinations (www.fredericksburg-texas.com, www.fredtexlodging.com).

Visitors can stroll downtown to sample fresh pecan pie at Fredericksburg Pie Company, savor handmade European-style truffles at Chocolat, enjoy locally roasted coffee next door at Fredericksburg Coffee & Tea, and choose among locally crafted glass, weaving, paintings and pottery at Artisans at Rocky Hill. The National Museum of the Pacific War (reopening in December following an expansion) is the only comprehensive facility devoted to its subject—located here because Rear Admiral Chester W. Nimitz was born and raised in Fredericksburg. Nearby, Rockbox Theater offers popular music standards plus a hilarious musical look at life in deer country.

One of the area's main attractions, the LBJ Ranch, now a National Historical Park, is 15 miles east of Fredericksburg (www.nps.gov/lyjo) where visitors can tour LBJ's office and peruse the personal artifacts that marked his broad character.

A 500-year-old live oak shades the swimming pool and frames the view down to Johnson's beloved Pedernales River, which, for reasons no one knows, is locally pronounced “Perdenales.”

Just a bit southeast of Fredericksburg, Luckenbach is a storied hamlet made famous by Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings. A place where residents ensure that time stands still, Luckenbach features nightly music, a small gift shop, a historic family-friendly dance hall, and a guarantee that no one will be, as Nelson and Jennings put it, “so busy keeping up with the Jones.” Instead, they'll be basking in balmy evenings in the shade of centuries-old live oaks, enjoying barbecued

brisket and listening to musical tales of Hill Country life (www.luckenbachtexas.com). And that's just as it's been for more than a century. —*E.L.*

Where to stay

The Driskill Hotel

Anchoring one end of downtown Austin's Sixth Street entertainment district, the 1886 Driskill was built by an early cattle baron, and retains a Belle Epoque elegance typified by brocade, brass, overstuffed chairs and stained glass. Prices start at \$189. 800-252-9367; www.driskillhotel.com.

Mansion at Judges' Hill

Perched atop a low rise just west of the UT campus, this plush boutique hotel offers spacious rooms on a quiet street. The towering columns and cut glass of the 1900 Goodall Wooten House recall the antebellum South, with large high-ceilinged rooms. The newer wings out back reflect the building's historic nature and surround a peaceful courtyard. Prices range from \$129 to \$399. 800-311-1619; www.judgeshill.com.

Hyatt Regency Lost Pines

Resort and Spa

Fronting the Colorado River in the countryside east of Austin, the Lost Pines is a spectacular resort with a championship golf course, tennis, horseback riding, a swimming pool complex and innumerable recreation opportunities. Distinctive touches include Texas art, such as Janis Joplin posters and glistening pecan flooring. The fine-dining Stories restaurant offers sensational Texas regional cuisine, spotlighting locally produced beef and pork. Off-peak rates start at \$149. 512-308-1234; www.visitlostpines.com.

Hangar Hotel

When Fredericksburg Brewing Company owner Richard Estenson set out to build a new boutique hotel, he focused on small but important details such as installing quiet air conditioners and attending to the 1940s theme. "Dial" phones, round-faced clocks and Art Moderne decor touches such as brushed metal all reinforce the period ambiance. Central Fredericksburg is just five minutes away. Prices start at \$119. 830-997-9990; www.hangarhotel.com. —*E.L.*