

TAKE A TRIPP

A GLIMPSE OF AUSTIN, TEXAS

AERIAL VIEW OF THE AUSTIN CITY LIMITS MUSIC FESTIVAL



It's fitting when arriving at the airport in Austin, Texas – the self-proclaimed Live Music Capital of the World – visitors are greeted by bands playing sets of alt-country, blues, roots, rock and R&B in the terminal arrival area eleven times a week in four locations. Leaving the baggage area, many Australians I've accompanied to the annual **South by Southwest (SXSW) Music, Film and Interactive Festivals and Conferences** smell smoke, making them believe there are nearby bushfires. But it's only the fires of countless barbecue joints searing flesh over smoking post oak fuelled grills.

As they head into town, they marvel at the trailer courts, thinking they are caravan parks but are in fact gatherings of gourmet food vans decked out in riotous colours on vacant lots serving an eclectic range of fast foods that are earning national raves for their unique flavours. They salivate at the sight of Mexican restaurants on nearly every block as they learn the difference between Tex-Mex (tacos, burritos, enchiladas, tortillas and chile rellenos like Old El Paso fare) and Interior Mexican (bitter chocolate sauces called Moles, ground pumpkin seed gravies called Pipin and homestyle stews or comfort food).

They see 35 three metre high guitars lining the streets, which Gibson erected in 2006 and that lead to a tall statue of local saint Stevie Ray Vaughan on Lake Travis that cuts through downtown like a river. And on every street, there seems to be someone carrying a guitar case.

But what really blows them away as the sun sets over the Travis Lake Bridge that sits at the edge of the city of Austin, is not the clouds of small screeching Mexican bats that stream into the horizon from under it. It's the sounds of hundreds of bands five blocks away on Sixth Street where dozens of live venues are lined up with an array of genres as exotic as the food of the ubiquitous trailers parked along the sidewalks, steaming, smoking and slinging their favoured fares to queues of famished fans.

Austin's not redneck city, it's the modern, friendly and gracious Capitol of Texas where Mexican immigrants blend with cowboys, country folk and Katrina refugees from neighbouring Louisiana who settled here. It's also an urban college haven where music rules the nights, smoked meats and elaborate wood-fired pizzas are the lunch faves while the Alamo is a brewhouse theatre that serves food and drinks in a comfy venue that shows indie and mainstream films. It's a tech town full of geeks, a foodie paradise attracting culinary tourists and a music magnet for audiences and

industry alike.

When music is on the menu, there are two anchor events for Austin. SXSW (www.sxsw.com) has been going 25 years and draws 2000 bands showcasing in 90 venues to an industry delegate base of 13,000 record label and publishing executives, media, managers, lawyers and wannabes every March. Since 2002, Australian and New Zealand showcasing bands have increased from five to more than sixty in 2011 and there are bands from over fifty countries.

SXSW's music event is just shy of a week with nightly showcases, three major free outdoor shows, a convention of speakers and panels as well as a trade show exhibition and Flatstock poster show, while the Interactive event attracts over 15,000 attendees a week earlier as does the Film Festival, both of which have been going for 17 years.

Austin City Limits Music Festival (www.aclfestival.com) celebrates its tenth year held in mid September on eight stages in Zilker Park. While SXSW features an array of indie bands in small or larger venues, ACL is for more mainstream acts which in 2010 featured The Eagles, Phish, Muse, Flaming Lips, The Strokes and Sonic Youth among a roster of close to 100 artists. But you'll also pick up intriguing up-and-comers among the indie tribes such as Australia's Angus and Julie Stone, Greencards and The Waifs.

The Festival is named after the longest running concert music television series of thirty years on PBS, the US national equivalent of the ABC. It's featured over 500 artists in rock, folk, country, bluegrass and zydeco. In a new 2700 seat, state of the art venue at the Moody Theatre that hosts 60-100 concerts a year, tickets for tapings are relatively easy to come by depending on the artist. Go to <http://austincitylimits.org> for details.

Even better, you can watch streaming video of concerts at <http://video.pbs.org/program/1273976454/> where there are currently close to fifty full concerts including Lyle Lovett, John Legend, Patsy Griffin, Allen Toussaint, Willie Nelson and Asleep At The Wheel, Ben Harper and Monsters of Folk just for starters. There are also several fascinating behind the scenes shorts and previews free online.

On the street, there are more live music venues per capita than any other music city in the world. From intimate Antone's that nurtured blues and roots music to beer barn La Zona Rosa, there are more than a hundred pubs, clubs and boozy ampitheatres that program live bands nightly. Sixth Street is the Bourbon Street of Austin with one club after the other on both sides blaring bands until the shut off time of 2am. The cross street of Red River is the apex though there are tons of venues outside the CBD. Among the best are:

Stubbs Bar-B-Q at 801 Red River Street www.stubbsaustin.com.

With an intimate indoor room and a large outdoor stage in a massive beer garden that slopes up to the stage for great sightlines, it's the best standup concert experience with the added benefit of great barbecue.

Antone's 213 5th Street www.antones.net.

It opened in 1975 as the first club on Sixth Street and has had performances by Eric Clapton, B.B. King, Muddy Waters, Buddy Guy, Pinetop Perkins and many more blues evangelists.

Continental Club 1315 S. Congress Ave. www.continentalclub.com.

The granddaddy of them all since 1957 on the main drag with a classic neon frontage and a red velvet stage. It's where the Nawlinz bands hang (often with free food), but also is home to retro roots,