

**Music City, Texas**  
Charlie Terrell and the Murdered Johns  
perform at the Continental Club.  
Opposite: Threadgill's

# Showtime in

# Austin

If you love music, food, and  
football—and really, what else is there?—the Texas  
state capital knows how to put on a show

BY JAN REID

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRENT HUMPHREYS



I know I have some dear old uncles who say about me, “Well, he went down there to Austin and got stuck.” It’s a fair charge; perhaps I should have had the ambition and fortitude to strike out for New York, Paris, or San Sebastián, places I now wish I’d lived for a while. But when I was twenty-three, I was just trying to get out of my Texas hometown. Austin is the adopted home of scores of people like me. We got here as fast as we could because parts of the city are beautiful, and because here we could sow some oats that would have gotten good and trampled in the burgs and oil-pipe towns we came from. Austin is not perfect, not by a long shot. The lovely springs are followed by summers when TV forecasters bark out strings of hundred-degree days like they’re mileposts in A-Rod’s hitting streak. Some years ago the traffic jams started

to become obscene, and the sprawling suburbs bear no resemblance to the Austin Billy Lee Brammer captured in his 1961 novel on the city and its politics, *The Gay Place*. A capital known for Ann Richards and other feisty liberals and the long, complicated shadow of Lyndon Johnson is still largely segregated, forty-five years after Johnson pushed civil rights acts through Congress. George W. Bush, who positioned himself to seek the presidency by upsetting Richards in the 1994 governor’s race, is likewise a major part of Austin’s legacy. Both Johnson and Bush were pseudo-ranchers as presidents, but Johnson liked to roam about his pastures in a Lincoln convertible and titillate his Eastern guests by showing them a prize bull trying to diddle a heifer.

The ongoing lionization of our almost-gone cowpokes raises the question of how much Austin belongs to the South. Our ancestors did permit slavery, and they chose to secede and fight on the losing side in the Civil War. But the last wayward stand of the Southern pine forest is twenty-five miles east of our Eden. Austin has as much in common with Tucson as Tuscaloosa.

LBJ’s “Texas White House” informed the rest of the nation that our Hill Country exists. No place else in Texas has such a wealth of wooded hills and ravines, meadows of bunchgrass prairie and spring-fed streams. My dad drove our family down to Austin one time to visit some kinfolks, and we went out to see the ranch house where he was born. It had two stories, with screened-in sleeping porches and a spiral staircase. My great-grandfather built it for two thousand bucks just after the turn of the last century, then lost his eyesight and the ranch during the Depression. Later some people in Austin would think enough of it to dismantle it and truck it into town and restore it. While my relatives prowled the onetime home place,



I had a fine time skipping rocks on the San Saba River. It was the first time I’d seen flowing water that wasn’t the color of mud.

Another thing that beckoned me then was football—the University of Texas Longhorns and a handsome, charismatic young coach named Darrell Royal who arrived in town in 1956. He turned out three national champions and sent to the pros a slew of stars that included Earl Campbell and Tommy Nobis. Royal was a quipster from a Dust Bowl town in Oklahoma, and for me, a hero. But by the time I finally got to Austin in 1970, I didn’t give two hoots about football. This was the heyday of storied music venues like the Armadillo World Headquarters and Soap Creek Saloon. One afternoon I watched Willie Nelson and his band climb on a flatbed trailer and play for free in a Ford dealership owned by one of Willie’s pals. Lubbock rock and roll poured in straight from the heart of Buddy Holly, and another bunch of musi-

cians from Dallas, foremost among them Stevie Ray Vaughan, scorned the cowboy hippies and liked to play big-city blues and work on cars. The San Antonio wunderkind Doug Sahm contributed a song verse that went “You just can’t live in Texas if you don’t have a lot of soul.” That line became a counter-conceit, Austin’s answer to the Texas yahoo wearing snakeskin boots and a diamond pinkie ring.

When oil went bust in the eighties, it took the Austin economy along, but in recent years high tech has more than compensated. People arrived with huge salaries that they packed into garish mansions in the limestone hills. But the computer giant home-grown by Michael Dell and friends has given the city back a delightful children’s museum, among other acts of civic generosity. A few years ago a San Francisco cabdriver told my wife and me that we had to experience this fabulous new grocery store called Whole Foods. Born in a drab, low-ceilinged Austin structure now occupied by a used record store called Cheapo’s, Whole Foods has since moved its corporate headquarters and opened a showcase market just a few blocks down Lamar Boulevard.

But nothing has changed this town like music. South by Southwest is a massive festival that began as a whim of the founders of our alternative weekly, the *Austin Chronicle*. In the seventies, musicians liked the cheap rent and baggies of smoke. Now bands come from all over the world to Austin and South by Southwest, hoping to get discovered by industry heavyweights who slip around among the kids who race from one bar and show to another. And the music market found plenty of room for a fall outdoor festival that draws acts like Bob Dylan and Tom Petty and stokes revenue into its sponsor, the PBS weekly program *Austin City Limits*. Produced in a University of



**Who Needs a Plate?**

The brisket at Sam’s Bar-B-Que, with plenty of extra sauce. Opposite: Town Lake Metropolitan Park

# City Without Limits

East meets West, old meets new, and Tex meets Mex in the cultural center of the Lone Star State by JOHN MORTHLAND



**Style Points**  
A Pontiac shows its Texas colors. Opposite, left to right: Annetta White, co-owner of the Broken Spoke; the archetypal Continental Club

Through all this urban pressure and dash, Austin continues to find its way. Lady Bird Johnson took it upon herself to beautify the nation's capital when her husband was president, and she committed the same artistic resolve to Austin when they came back home. The dammed-up Colorado River lake that now bears her name announces spring with a breathtaking display of blooming trees along its running and hiking trails. And her National Wildflower Research Center and wildflower seeding project have extended her legacy and created a canvas of color along hundreds of miles of Texas roadsides.

Austin takes bows for its food. You've long been able to find good steakhouses—it's a Texas thing. Near kin to this is the cult of barbecue. I enjoy a helping of brisket and sausage now and then, but if I ever move somewhere else, I'll miss our Mexican food more than the barbecue. Austin began to get superior restaurants in the eighties. World-famous chefs tinker with menus and recipes here now. Uchi, Jeffrey's, Fonda San Miguel, 34<sup>th</sup> Street Café, Vespaio, and Enoteca are among the restaurants that live up to their reputations. But when my wife and I are in a particular romantic mood, we look to an old favorite—a French bistro called Chez Nous, which is owned by Pascal Regimbeau and Sybil Reinhart-Regimbeau. As young Parisians they came to the States carrying backpacks and steered their route through Austin because they were fans of Texas music. They liked what they found here and in 1982 opened a downtown café that's steeped in the companionable style of Austin. All these years they've provided the best prix fixe in town—plus good wine and, now and then, a waitress who looks and sounds like Brigitte Bardot. Pascal drives a vintage black 1959 Cadillac, sports the classiest ponytail of any man I know, and has a consuming interest in Native America. All of this variety adds up to a place we treasure and close friendships that, for my wife, go back as much as half a century, to her freshman dormitory. Forget where we came from—good and bad, that's another Texas, another story. Almost on first arrival, we looked around and knew that here would be a life's worth of home.

Texas studio, the show began with a rough 1974 pilot featuring Willie Nelson; this year the show is being designated a historic landmark by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Willie is Austin music's international icon, but its hottest commodity at the moment is the indie rock trio Spoon.

The community of writers is both friendly and daunting. Oscar Casares (*Broxensville, Amigoland*) is among the best of the young fiction writers. Lawrence Wright, a *New Yorker* staff writer and winner of a 2007

Pulitzer for his thunderous chronicle of al-Qaeda, *The Looming Tower*, has made his home in the Tarrytown section of Austin for two decades; his avocation is playing piano in a long-lived rock garage band. The magnetism of Austin tugs at artists in all fields. Today the crew of the critically praised TV series *Friday Night Lights* uses a high school gridiron out by the airport. Sandra Bullock has moved to town and has quietly contributed a couple of stylish small restaurants and a New York-worthy deli.



**EAT**  
**Cisco's Restaurant Bakery & Bar**

Back when Austin was dry on Sundays, pols like LBJ frequented this East Side breakfast-lunch diner for a little alcoholic kick in their morning juice. Cisco's doesn't serve breakfast cocktails anymore, but it still offers some of the finest *migas*, a Tex-Mex scrambled-egg specialty, in town. 1511 E. 6<sup>th</sup> St.; 512-478-2420

**Fonda San Miguel**

Dinner at America's pioneering upscale restaurant serving cuisines of the Mexican interior (it opened in 1975) still makes for a memorable evening thanks to its art-filled walls and the kaleidoscopic flavors coming out of the kitchen. 2330 W. North Loop Blvd.; [fondasanmiguel.com](http://fondasanmiguel.com)

**Güero's Taco Bar**

The taqueria-and-more of choice for



visiting celebs, dignitaries, and Bill Clinton is equally popular with South Austin artists and musicians, community figures and families. It's always chaotic, but the food is piquant and the prices are reasonable. 1412 S. Congress Ave.; [guerostacobar.com](http://guerostacobar.com)

**Hudson's on the Bend**

Not only does this Southwestern-accented fine-dining establishment west of town offer a state-of-the-art

rib eye cooked over hardwoods, it will serve you state-of-the-art venison, wild boar, rattlesnake, elk, buffalo, and rabbit. 3509 Ranch Rd. 620 N; [hudsonsonthebend.com](http://hudsonsonthebend.com)

**Sam's Bar-B-Que**

Black and boho Austin have been coming to this ramshackle, mostly takeout joint (two tables, two booths) for three decades for the old-school fatty brisket, pork ribs,

## EAT

### Hoover's Cooking

Way back when, Hoover Alexander worked in Austin's first desegregated restaurant. Now he's got his own place(s), with humongous chicken-fried steaks, moist meat loaf, earthy fresh vegetables, real hoecakes, and other hearty Texas/Southern soul food delights. 2002 Manor Rd.; [hooverscooking.com](http://hooverscooking.com)



**Soul Man**  
Proprietor Hoover Alexander

sausage, chicken, and even mutton. When Sam's burned down in 1992, customers pitched in to rebuild it. 1200 E. 12<sup>th</sup> St.; 512-478-0378

### Street Vendors

It started with the taco trucks that roamed East Side neighborhoods, a migration of street vendors from Mexico. They soon evolved into stationary taco trailers, which several years ago began popping up in vacant fields and parking lots west of I-35. Today, food trailers serve a staggering variety of inexpensive, freshly prepared treats. Among the best in the downtown area are **Torchy's Tacos** (1311 S. 1st St., one of three locations); **Flip Happy**

**Crepes** (400 Jessie St.); **Kebablicious** (407 E. 7<sup>th</sup> St.); **Lulu B's** (2113 S. Lamar Blvd.) for Vietnamese *banh mi* sandwiches and vermicelli bowls; and the **Mighty Cone** (1603 S. Congress Ave.), specializing in a cone-shaped tortilla stuffed with chicken, shrimp, or avocado fried in a batter with sesame seeds, chopped almonds, and arbol chili flakes.

### Uchi

Great sushi in Texas? Tyson Cole's classic and fusion Japanese cuisine balances local ingredients with seafood flown in from around the world to satisfy the Austin foodie's craving to keep up with the coasts. 801 S. Lamar Blvd.; [uchiaustin.com](http://uchiaustin.com)



Driskill Hotel

## DRINK

### Cedar Door

The self-proclaimed originator of the Mexican martini (tequila, triple sec, fresh lime juice, olives, and a proprietary mix) has had four locations around downtown since opening in 1975. Whenever it moves, the politicians, lawyers, journalists, and businessmen follow close behind. 201 Brazos St.; [cedardooraustin.com](http://cedardooraustin.com)

### Malverde

Austin's hottest new watering hole occupies a glass-enclosed patio upstairs at the Mexican restaurant La Condesa. Mixologist Junior Merino pours more than eighty tequilas and signature cocktails like the Alma

Blanca: habanero-infused tequila, ginger essence, aloe-vera-lemon-grass syrup, pineapple juice, *hoja de hierba santa*, with a hibiscus-rose-infused salt rim. 400-B W. 2<sup>nd</sup> St.; [lacondesaustin.com](http://lacondesaustin.com)

### Scholz Garten

Students and other locals flock to the oldest business in Texas—est. 1866—to talk politics and enjoy its German and bar-food menu, gracious *Biergarten*, and Thursday-night oompah band. 1607 San Jacinto Blvd.; [scholzgarten.net](http://scholzgarten.net)

## SLEEP

### Driskill Hotel

Cattle baron Jesse Driskill built this ritzy hotel in 1886. Subsequent restorations and additions have stayed true to his grand intentions, from the opulent, columned lobby with marble floors and stained-glass dome to the four-diamond restaurant. 604 Brazos St.; [driskillhotel.com](http://driskillhotel.com)

### Kimber Modern

Not exactly a boutique hotel, not exactly a B and B, this six-room concrete-and-glass masterwork of European modernism and minimalism opened in fall 2008 in the trendy SoCo area just south of downtown. Tucked among live oaks on a hillside, it's unlike anything else in Austin. 110 The Circle; [kimbermodern.com](http://kimbermodern.com)

## SHOP

### BookPeople

Peerless selection? Check. Regular A-list readings? Ditto. Good café and other diversions? Yep. This prize-winning store treats reading like it's a lifestyle, and readers like they're a community. 603 N. Lamar Blvd.; [bookpeople.com](http://bookpeople.com)

### Central Market

The now-statewide culinary theme park was born in this Austin store, selling the primest meats, freshest fish, and most exotic ingredients



Mohawk



Hotel San José

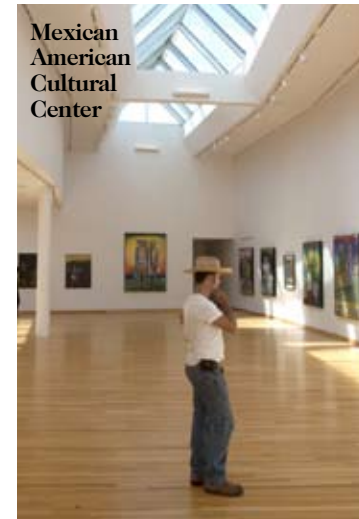
# Urban Cowboys

Four Austin residents who help give the city its spice *by* JOHN MORTHLAND

to gourmets and foodies. 4001 N. Lamar Blvd.; [centralmarket.com](http://centralmarket.com)

## Manny Gammage's Texas Hatters

You weren't going to leave Texas without a custom-made cowboy hat,



Mexican American Cultural Center



Malverde

were you? Here's the best around—just ask Willie Nelson, Don King, or George W. Bush. If President Obama doesn't have one yet, he probably will soon. 911 S. Commerce St. in Lockhart; [texashatters.com](http://texashatters.com)

## McBride's Guns

Owner Joe McBride calls it "an old-fashioned gun store." Customers appreciate the unusually broad

inventory (including optics, knives, and fishing gear) and the range of services (like gunsmithing), as well as the unusually knowledgeable staff. Non-shooters can admire the antique firearms selection. 2915 San Gabriel St.; [mcbridesguns.com](http://mcbridesguns.com)



Waterloo Records & Video



Kimber Modern

## Waterloo Records & Video

Remember vinyl? No? Okay, remember CDs? Waterloo is a brick-and-mortar holdout that never gave up on either. The staff knows everything going on musically everywhere, but especially locally; here's where to catch up on all Austin music. 600A N. Lamar Blvd.; [waterloorecords.com](http://waterloorecords.com)

## Whole Foods Market

This cavernous flagship of the international organic and natural foods market established in Austin in 1980 is like a parallel universe, and there's never a moment in the day when it isn't packed. Honest, you gotta see it to believe it. 525 N. Lamar Blvd.; [wholefoodsmarket.com](http://wholefoodsmarket.com)

## SEE AND DO

### Alamo Drafthouse Cinemas

The theaters show first-run and independent movies and host wacky themed events; food and drink service includes surprisingly well prepared pizzas, salads, burgers, sandwiches, and snacks, plus quality beers and wines. Some locations offer signature cocktails and a lavish weekend brunch. Some critics call them the best places in America to watch a movie. Four Austin locations. 320 E. 6th St. (main downtown theater); [drafthouse.com](http://drafthouse.com)

### Barton Springs Pool

This three-acre natural-spring-fed swimming hole has been the rallying point for some of the nastiest political battles—greens vs. developers—in this ultra-politicized town. Once you acclimate to the sixty-eight-degree water, you'll understand why devotees consider it sacred space. Zilker Park.

### Broken Spoke

Since opening in 1964, this honky-tonk seemingly hasn't changed a whit. The front-room bar-restaurant houses a Texas country "museum" featuring a cigar smoked down by Bob Wills himself. In back, couples glide around the dance floor in a clockwise circle to no-frills bands apparently allergic to present-day Nashville. 3201 S. Lamar Blvd.; [brokenspokeaustintx.com](http://brokenspokeaustintx.com)

### Continental Club

Occupying the same South Congress building in various incarnations

since 1957, the Continental is dark, small, and intimate, serves no food, and books first-rate, rootsy rock, rockabilly, country, blues, and swing: the archetypal Austin club. 1315 S. Congress Ave.; [continentalclub.com](http://continentalclub.com)

### Mexican American Cultural Center

There are always at least a couple of highly accessible things going on in this spirited two-year-old institution: movies, book groups, plays, classes, lectures, holiday fiestas, art openings, you name it. Check out the 3rd Annual Dia Muertos Festival (Nov. 1, including workshops on sugar skulls and papier-mâché skeletons). 600 River St.; [maccaustin.org](http://maccaustin.org)

### Mohawk

Inspired by the northeastern Native American tribe, this happening indoor/outdoor club is built from recycled materials and combines next-big-thing local and touring rock bands with intrepid visual art and no-nonsense drinks. 912 Red River; [mohawkaustin.com](http://mohawkaustin.com)

### South Austin Museum of Popular Culture

Here's where the seventies Armadillo crowd went. With poster, comix, tattoo, and art exhibitions that are both earnest and tongue-in-cheek, this funky monument to Austin bohemia's defiantly weird past (and present) rocks as hard as the 13th Floor Elevators. 1516 B S. Lamar Blvd.; [samopc.org](http://samopc.org)

### University of Texas Campus

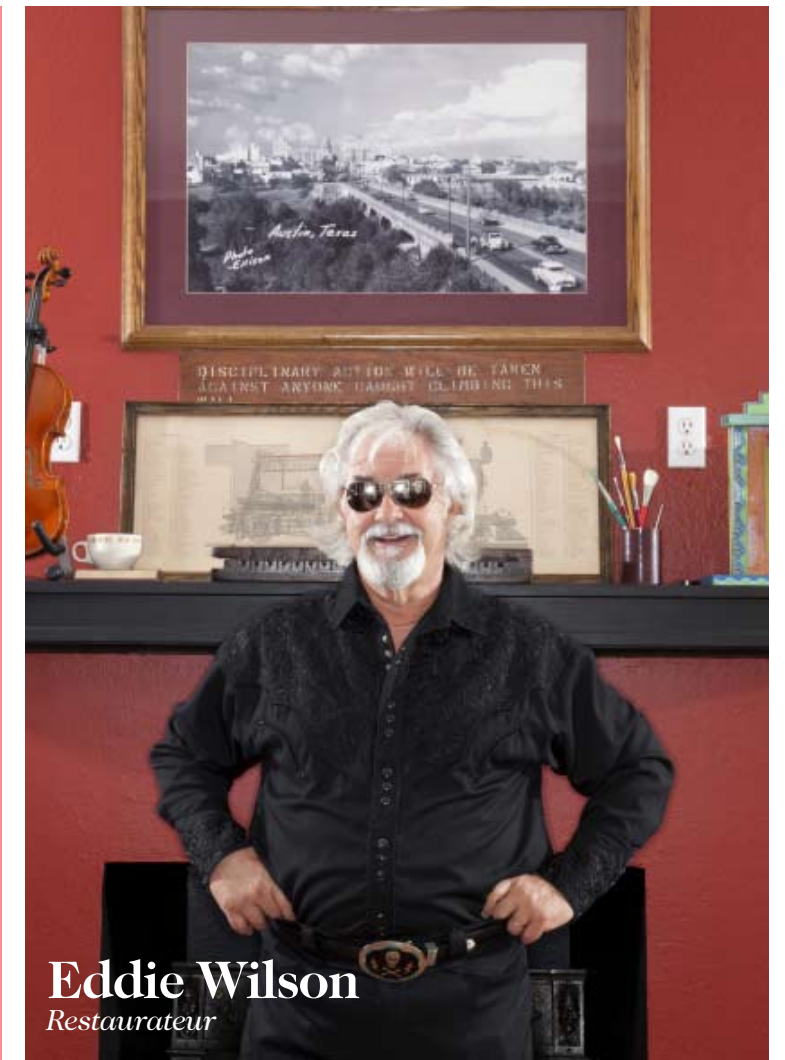
Including the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum; the refurbished Blanton Museum of Art, with its strong Renaissance, Baroque, and Latin American collections; and the Harry Ransom Center, whose holdings include the first photograph, one of five complete Gutenberg Bibles in this country, and Norman Mailer's papers. [utexas.edu](http://utexas.edu)



Evan Smith  
Media Man

This New Yorker arrived in 1992 as a *Texas Monthly* editor, ascending to editor in chief in 2000 and growing omnipresent around town: on the boards of the Austin Film Society, the Blanton Museum of Art, and PBS affiliate KLRU (where he hosts an interview program), emceeing or speaking at countless events. Smith continued the

magazine's award-winning ways while altering its focus to attract more of Texas's mushrooming nonnative population, before resigning recently to head up the new online political venture *Texas Tribune*. "The magazine got me to Texas," he explains, "but Austin kept me here; it's an extraordinary place, especially for a city its size."



Eddie Wilson  
Restaurateur

Wilson is an Austin history buff ("This is a great place for the practice of oral history," he says, laughing) who makes his own as often as possible. After midwifing the seventies "cosmic cowboy" scene symbolized by Willie Nelson, Wilson closed his storied Armadillo World Headquarters venue on New Year's Eve 1980. He

relaunched a local institution as Threadgill's Home Cookin' the next year, and he proceeded to do for chicken-fried steak and veggies what he had done for redneck-hippie détente. He later opened another Threadgill's bordering on the original 'Dillo site; both serve as repositories for Austin music memorabilia.



## Ruben Ramos

*Singer*

Austin's top Tejano-music star for four decades, Ramos is nicknamed El Gato Negro (the Black Cat) after his 1980s hit about an outlaw hipster, but the phrase also describes this onetime runway model's slinky stage presence. He peppers his tight revue-style show with English-language R & B oldies and is one of the rare Tejano stars to work with big-name Anglos like the late Stevie Ray Vaughan. "Music is universal; we opened for Guns N' Roses once in Denmark and people liked us both," Ramos recalls. If any single singer is the Voice of Austin, he's it.

## Liz Lambert

*Hotelier/Developer*

Lambert was a recovering lawyer nearly a decade ago when she converted a sleazy 1939 motor court on then-seedy South Congress Avenue into the boutique Hotel San José, catering to musicians and arty types and anchoring now-fashionable SoCo. In late 2008, she opened the rock-star-decadent fourteen-room Hotel Saint Cecilia in a renovated 1880s Victorian around the corner. With two Austin coffee and sandwich stands and more inn-crowd projects around Texas, Lambert has become queen of the cutting-edge hospitality business. "These places reflect a love of the outdoors and a love of the music scene," she says. "People traveling to Austin get that as well as the people in Austin do." ☺

