

SOUNDCHECK

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A Real American Idol

TERRY LICKONA

Executive Producer of

AUSTIN CITY LIMITS

The man behind television's
longest running music series

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**Braids
Yuck**

**Mother Falcon
Voodoo Fest**

ISSUE 25



A Real American Idol

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The man at the helm of TV's longest running music series shares his journey as he guides the beloved show into the future.

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Terry Lickona is fumbling with a problematic control board in the darkness of KLRU's Studio 6A. He sequentially flips one switch after another, twisting knobs and checking sockets. Lickona casually glances at the rafters of the empty space with each click, looking for a scattered hint of light here, a flickered shadow there.

For a moment Lickona's nonchalance almost tricks me into thinking that we're not somewhere distinctive. As if we aren't somewhere uniquely special. But then the lights flick on, and the space – at once so innocuous and indifferent – is suddenly electric, roaring with energy from 36 years of crooned vocals, strummed chords, and captured zeitgeists. It's as if those dancing and singing memories of 6A are still omnipresent, lurking in the air, still gracing the faux Austin skyline.

And it's no longer just a room; it's an entire history.

The Past

Nestled in a nondescript corner of the University of Texas campus, wedged somewhere between the baseball caps and backpacks of rushed undergrads and the smoke plumes of hemp-wheeling street vendors, sits KLRU's Studio 6A. From the outside, it's remarkably unremarkable. But hike up some gravel steps, take an elevator to the sixth floor, and walk down a broad corridor – the yellow brick road of Austin, if you will – and the landscape abruptly changes. The walls are lined with photos of the history of *Austin City Limits*, photos of Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash, and Ray Charles, leading you into the studio. It's the path to a program that has been, in many ways, the heart of the Austin music scene.

The stage is still warm from the last performance that Studio 6A will ever host for *Austin City Limits*: Lyle Lovett, an embodiment of the show's past and homage to the artists that have graced the lens of the program. "Closing Time" was the last song and, appropriately, there was Lickona, singing alongside Lovett and flanked by the crew.

"To be continued," pronounced a smiling Lickona. And with that, the longest running music show drifted off into new horizons. With a nod to the decorated past of KLRU's Studio 6A, 2011 marks the opening of *Austin City Limits Live* at The Moody Theater, adjoining W Austin, at 310 Willie Nelson Blvd.

"We have mixed feelings, of course," admits Lickona from the first row of seats in the empty 6A. "It's kind of a bittersweet feeling, as much as we feel attached to this space and the history and all that. It's part of our DNA." If the program is emblematic of the heart of Austin, Lickona is unmistakably the pulse. Originally from New

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Willie Nelson
Austin City Limits Live at
The Moody Theater
February 14, 2011



York, he speaks with a misleadingly Texan pace, at once talkative and yet tempered and thoughtful. His casual demeanor is relaxing, but for all of his untailored intonations, there is one prevailing sentiment about Lickona: his hands are unfailingly involved in almost every facet of *Austin City Limits*.

He readily recounts how people questioned him for booking Tom Waits, or when he first decided to look outside of Texas for talent. "I knew that there was a whole world of music out there and so little opportunity on television to showcase...music that is a little left field," he says. He recounts how Ray Charles validated the show as something more than a regional program. Lickona's vision for the program has always been far-reaching and ambitious, and it's that ambition that has made the show an unprecedented success. For now, however, Lickona's too busy with moving the operation to its new home for idle reflection.

The Present

The \$40 million dollar space is state-of-the-art and, by all accounts, dazzling. Gone are the inherent problems that came with 6A: the lack of bathrooms, the fire code restrictions that reduced the capacity from roughly 600 to 320, and the difficulties of loading equipment to the sixth floor. Lickona is thankful for the arrangement with the University of Texas, but adds "this studio was not built to accommodate a production with a live audience and live music." ACL Live gives Lickona and company the opportunity to continue to "grow this little homegrown Texas music show into something even bigger than it has already become."

The move, however, hasn't come without some confusion. Austin City Limits Live at The Moody Theater functions as a full-time music venue, but only certain shows being taped specifically for the Austin City Limits TV show are associated with Lickona and his production team (some fans have incorrectly assumed all shows at the venue are to be broadcasted on PBS).

KLRU's Studio 6A will also continue to be used for ongoing programming such as Evan Smith's *Overheard*, pledge drives, screenings and ACL Presents: *Satellite Sets*, an Internet-only show featuring up-and-coming acts. Recordings from *Austin City Limits* tapings at the new venue are sent to master control at KLRU for editing.

Lickona knows the confusion will take some time to sort itself out.

"Whenever [ACL Live] announce[s] a show, everybody assumes that we're taping Tony Bennett or Diana Ross or John Mellencamp or whomever, and we're not." While the venue functions full-time, *Austin City Limits* sticks to its 13-programs a year schedule. Although, hints Lickona, "the talent is out there" for more, suggest-

"I knew that there was a whole world of music out there and so little opportunity on television to showcase...music that is a little left field."

Trombone Shorty
Austin City Limits Live at
The Moody Theater
February 18, 2011



ing the infrastructure could handle seasons of as many as 20 or 26 shows annually.

While the venue is new, the show itself is consciously attempting to be the same, to not lose the intimate spirit that surrounds it. ACL Live was designed with the stability of the program at heart, but simultaneously allows for more fans, better facilities, and a studio built entirely with the show in mind. “[We wanted to] create a space that looks and feels as close to the original as possible,” cites Lickona, assuaging whatever skeptical purists remain. With a grin, he claims that some people watching on TV won’t even notice a difference.

The new stage is still low to the ground, just as it was in Studio 6A. The new Austin skyline backdrop mirrors the old one (with a few new buildings and creative liberties thrown in). Tickets will still be free and announced via the website. ACL Live won’t be able to serve free beer, but with ample bars the adult beverages won’t be in short supply for, say, the Flogging Molly show Lickona has in the works. The show and the surrounding experience remain, as much as possible, untouched.

“We would have meetings with the architects, meetings with the theater consultants and acoustic consultants and dozens of people involved, [in Studio 6A]...and talk about the future in the new space and the design and all the various elements. It was inspiring to be talking about the future while we were [in 6A],” Lickona recalls.

“If there is one ethos pushing *Austin City Limits*, it’s that you can’t have a future without giving credence to what got you there,” Lickona shared. While he acknowledges the importance of preserving the spirit of the show, you can see him light up when talking about what lies ahead. The gears are grinding in his head every second, and he beams while talking about the potential of what comes next.

The Future

The adjustable capacity (up to 2750 when not functioning for *Austin City Limits* tapings) makes the venue attractive for a variety of acts. For tapings, the size will be reduced to a comfy 800, as black theater drapes will be lowered to conceal the upper balcony section. The venue is fixed for 3D projections with a screen, and Lickona envisions a laundry list of other opportunities at ACL Live: comedy sets, TV show pilots, and a Latin music series all roll off the top of his head. And without any surprise, ACL Live is now an official SXSW venue.

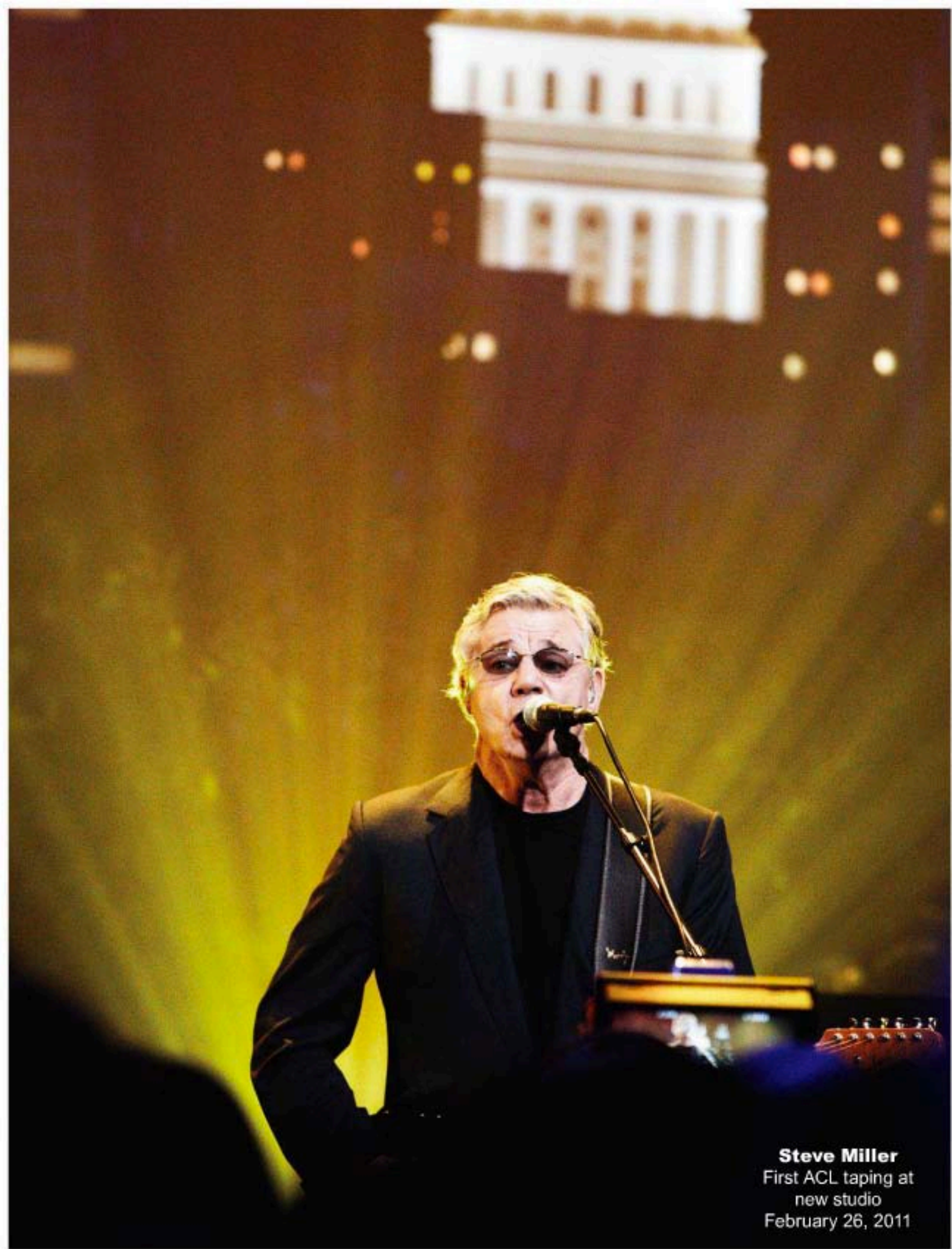
Of course, what matters most is the artists that come in to fill the venue. “Radiohead has a new album out,” Lickona smirks. “Paul McCartney has never played Austin, but word is he wants to,” he

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Terry Lickona

Introducing My Morning
Jacket at their ACL Taping
August 25, 2008





Steve Miller
First ACL taping at
new studio
February 26, 2011

ponders aloud. “[*Austin City Limits* veteran] Wilco is dropping an album this year too,” he notes, adding fuel to the rumor mills. And with a state-of-the-art facility, Lickona will be able to recruit acts more successfully than ever. It allows him to branch out as well: he’s excited about the potential of hosting *Austin City Limits*’ first electronic show, echoing the introduction of hip-hop last season with K’Naan and Mos Def.

“Daft Punk has a new record coming out and did the soundtrack for *Tron*. One of the shows I’ve heard the most about from ACL Fest was Deadmau5. Somebody of that caliber would be a pretty cool show,” hints Lickona. Eclecticism, it would seem, is one of his goals for the new space, and with the technology and size of ACL Live he’ll have every opportunity to broaden the ever-expanding series.

Opening Night

With The Steve Miller Band playing its first ever *Austin City Limits* taping, ACL Live is unveiled to the public. The natural brown wood grain of the new stage is cozy and will someday have its own stories to tell. The backdrop is lit with a few extra high-rises, and the overhead lighting and sound are a recognizable (and stunning) upgrade.

That being said, it possesses the same familiar vibrancy and intimacy that is the hallmark of the program. Blues-man at heart, Miller thanks Lickona for queuing some footage of Lightnin’ Hopkins from 1974 in the green room just before they took the stage. Of the many hats Lickona wears, inspiring the artists is perhaps one of the most important, yet least acknowledged. He’s the constant of *Austin City Limits*, and on opening night he takes his familiar role as master of ceremonies. It’s as if nothing has changed at all, and the comfortable-yet-glossy new digs underline that familiarity.

Back in Studio 6A

Lickona takes a brief look around 6A after our interview winds down. It’s not a nostalgic moment, but more of a tip-of-the-cap. “It’s not so bad just to come and hang out here for an hour,” he fleetingly remarks. “But now is definitely time to shift focus on the future.” On the control board he lowers the lights, and all the memories that charged Studio 6A come to a hush. For Lickona, the past isn’t locked in these four walls. The history of *Austin City Limits* can’t be that easily corralled. Instead, it’s predicated on the spirit of the shows, the engagement of the fans collected in front of short stages and fabricated skylines. It doesn’t leave him, no matter where he or his program goes. The history of *Austin City Limits* will travel with him to ACL Live, not just the semblance of the end of an era, but as the comforting foundation for an era anew.

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