

Kevin Anderson

### Keeping Austin

In south-central Texas where the hill country dumps into the Colorado River, and the humid Gulf air dries in the gusts from the Chihuahuan Desert of West Texas, the city of Austin lies sparkling under chrome-tinted skyscrapers, spreading ever more expansive beneath crane and beam and bulldozer. Austinites are a brew of Texans, Mexicans, Californians, tech industry hustlers and hippies, artists, foodies and fair weather lovers. Austinites preach, "Keep Austin weird!" in reference to Austin's unique blend of art and commerce, cowboys, college and culture, a Tex-Mex urban-country music-fueled, free-spirited stir that makes Austin a special place, but, really, once one uses the word 'keep,' whatever is meant to be kept is already gone, buried under the new. Austin is not weird anymore; its weirdness has been bought and sold, consumed, developed, and screen-printed onto t-shirts and hats. The rents have gone up in Austin, and the quirky has gone out as the real estate has developed up and out. Change is inevitable in life; the interest is in how things change. Austin is undergoing the great flattening of culture that all of America is experiencing, the big-box, corporate takeover, overnight-delivery, one-size-fits-all, mass-production of American culture, and I wanted to see if the old Austin was still there, at least in bits, among the developing sprawl.

Nostalgia for the weird Austin still draws visitors and new residents; the bars on 6<sup>th</sup> Street still overflow on Saturday nights with college kids, tourists, business people drunk in suit and tie; the bridge to South Continental still fills with bat-watchers (but the bats seem disinterested); and, most importantly, touring musicians still play the little clubs whose walls seem held together with memories pinned like black-and-white photographs of a thousand performers of bluegrass, blues, rock-n-roll and country, of western, of swing.

You can still get an Amy's Ice Cream and a Hey Cupcake!, emblems of '00s Austin fun, and they are still just as good as I remember, and there are still hipster food trucks on every remaining undeveloped lot, with curry tacos and vegan empanadas and gyro sliders, but now the faded chrome trucks are rusting up on blocks with flat tires, cobwebbed, tilted, and preserved in stasis year after year. There's something unappetizing about an immovable food truck; it's just an awful restaurant—with no plumbing.

I remember a dozen years ago on my first visit to Austin, walking behind a skyscraper to a clapboard farmhouse, yellow and porched, with a dirt-and-scruff yard and a chicken coop nailed to the wall, a speckled hen standing on a rusted air conditioner on the ground. That was weird. It was a little barnyard in the shadow of a tech industry headquarters building off 12<sup>th</sup> Street, and that step from urban high-rise to Texas farmhouse felt like no other city in America. I listened for a goat but heard a siren. My friend, Anna, lived there with her boyfriend. She was getting her PhD in Native American performance art at the University of Texas, and she had just returned from teaching an undergrad English class.

We drank beers on the porch in frayed lawn chairs and watched the skyscrapers grow. It felt like the tide of the city would soon wash over this little spot, but we had a perfect view of the building swell. Anna said she was getting her PhD because she wanted to be an expert in something, but now, what she really wanted was to go homesteading in the Midwest, go to one of those Iowa-Missouri kinds of states, flat and open and grassy, wanted to buy a campervan and set up on a plot of land and raise livestock and be self-sufficient, grow grains, get water from a spring or a brook, sell little handmade doodads, and live a simple life the way she imagined people used to live. I thought of my job working on an organic farm in California, on my knees

in steaming mud cutting spinach all day. I told her farming was hard; she should get tenure instead.

We cut through a park that night in the dark. Anna said it was safe; there was no crime in Austin. I said there's always crime everywhere and looked over my shoulder until we reached the other side. We ate Mexican food at a restaurant Anna called authentic. I don't know what that means, authentic, but the food was good and the margaritas salty and limed. We took a transit bus to SoCo, South Continental, wandered into the Continental Club and drank \$3 Lone Stars while Deke Dickerson played a double-necked guitar past midnight for a ten-dollar cover.

The next morning we had Bloody Marys and fried ochre and pickled sweet peppers and sat at a picnic table on a lawn under a tree by a farmhouse that had been converted to a bar just off campus. Students came and went from picnic tables, met friends, sat on the porch. Pitchers of beer came from the bar, trays of food. I liked Austin then—weird, not weird, I didn't care, and I also didn't think about what Austin had been or what it could be. I just enjoyed the present. When I think of that city now, at that time, my memory of the place is like a cartoon amusement park map drawn to mark all the fun attractions. My memory is not the territory, but something I built on top of the territory, real and imagined.

That memory makes me think of Jorge Luis Borges's one-paragraph story, "On Exactitude in Science," in which an empire's cartography developed to such a precise degree that an exact map of the empire was created, a map that perfectly replicated the territory in full size and detail, and when the map was laid across the empire for all to admire, the people forgot that they were on top of a map, and the simulation became reality even as it disintegrated and shredded with time. Now I can think back to sitting on the porch of that yellow farmhouse with Anna watching the city manifest, and I feel a sense of Borges's idea, the layering of simulation

over reality that forms a new reality and the map that becomes the territory. That yellow house has certainly been covered over by now.

On a recent Saturday night I found myself back in Austin, again—caring, maybe, about Austin’s weirdness—and wondering if a scrap of the old Austin was still there; I found myself back in SoCo, staring at the neon Continental Club sign buzzing and beckoning in nostalgic orange and white. I wasn’t there for the main club, though. A little paper sign taped to the inside of a window, tattered and dog-eared with an arrow pointing left, read, *Continental Gallery*, my destination.

Above the Continental there is a small space called the Gallery, a former restaurant, former office space, gutted, redone. Through a nondescript, blacked-out glass door next to an alley, up a flight of stairs, no cover before ten, you’ll find a red room with wood floors, couches on the walls, and half-a-dozen high-tops clumped and surely crowded with patrons. There was a tiny bar in the back with no mixers and no taps and a three-foot wide neon *Continental* sign that hung over a space for the band at the end of a dance floor. The room glowed red, glowed pink and purple-red and blue on dark white walls, and red light bulbs, strung like Christmas lights, berried blooming from wall to wall. The bar was red, and the bartender had red in her hair, streaked in blond and bobbed.

I grabbed two cans of local IPA, and my girlfriend pulled me onto a couch, cuddling, as Whit Smith, from the Hot Club of Cowtown, broke into a vamp on his vintage archtop guitar. An upright bass player slapped long-stringed arpeggios, and a drummer brushed circles swinging on his snare. The music filled the space, and a man jumped up from a couch, sixtyish, crossed the room, spoke, pulled hand in hand a woman from her seat, and they danced, western swing, turning and turning on heels and toes, and swinging, arms encircled, round the room. And

another couple joined, and then a third, filling the dance floor, swirling skirts and high heels. I don't know how to dance; I don't know the steps, the pattern—I wish I did. It's lovely to watch, like a celebration.

Whit, with his cowboy shirtsleeves rolled up, sang “It Stops with Me” in a gentle, dreamy voice, effortless and practiced:

When you tuck me in at night  
Roll up the covers, turn out the light  
Kiss me on the cheek and say  
I heard Tony Chop-Chop got away...

I pulled my girl close and smiled, our faces radiant like the cherried lights, and as the whole club came to life and swooned with the music and the dancing couples, I wondered, is this what it was like fifty years ago, eighty years ago, to be in a honky-tonk, a jazz club, dive-bar dancing, a juke joint, nothing but musicians and a dance floor and people humming on the same frequency to the tune of a box guitar? Have we kept this space to guard against the change, to preserve, to feel nostalgia and remember even the things we never experienced?

You're the toast of the town  
With neighbors around  
You're the cool one,  
You're a chameleon  
And I'm waiting for the change

I took sips of cold beer between verses and tapped my feet and sang what lyrics I could remember. I wanted to dance, hypnotic, entranced. I wanted to love, my girlfriend, this place,

this life, everything. Energy stirred the room and in me, and I felt the pulse of life singing. Why can't life be a dance that swings around and around until all the songs have come to an end?

An hour later, we stood in the back of the bar, swaying, dancing, holding newly opened cans of cold beer frothy in our hands, whispering in each other's ears, holding close, holding close and dancing and holding. And the room swayed with us, people packed now shoulder to shoulder, the heat of the bodies making the room languid and fevered. I no longer needed to know the steps to dance, no longer cared about the pattern, what had come before, or what would come later. The moment was alive, and all was asway and the lulling and the rhythm and the groove and the night in the darkness at the back of the bar by the stairs under a red glow—there was just enough space for us to circle and turn and circle again as we danced above Austin.

Works Cited

The Hot Club of Cowtown. "It Stops with Me." *Ghost Train*, SHOUT!, 2002.