

Austin music scene seeing troubled times

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AUSTIN — When he thinks about the Austin music scene these days, Joe Nick Patoski says what comes to mind is a lyric in a Joni Mitchell song that goes, "They paved paradise and put up a parking lot."

"Austin has been unique because it encouraged original music and the venues to play," says Patoski, who manages musician Joe "King" Carrasco. "What's been unique about it isn't quite there any more."

"Progressive" country music made popular by Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings put Austin on the musical map nationally in the 1970s, but today there is disagreement over the state of the live music scene in the Texas capital city.

Patoski is one of those who believes Austin's booming economy, linked to high-tech industry, is strangling one of its main drawing cards—the live music scene.

University of Texas professor Dowell Myers spurred debate over the issue recently when he concluded in a study of the city's quality of life that Austin's music scene was in a state of decline because of the number of live music clubs that have closed.

Others associated with the business disagree, saying Austin clubs are merely going through a regular transition where one type of music supplants another.

All agree, however, there is more

quality live music of all types to be heard in Austin than any city outside New York or Los Angeles.

"There are a lot of squeaky wheels looking for oil," says Ernie Gammage, who leads an Austin-based rhythm blues band known as Ernie Sky and the K-Tels. "The people who are bitching about the scene are the ones whose music is going down the tubes."

Gammage, president of the Austin chapter of the Texas Music Association, says R&B and jazz are on the rise and country-western and new wave are on the decline in Austin.

Myers' study was based on a survey of the number of live music clubs that have closed in Austin, starting with the renowned Armadillo World Headquarters in 1980.

"For the bankers, the only thing they care about is the symphony and ballet," he said. "For the young high-tech workers, what's great about Austin, Texas, is Texas music, not the symphony."

The UT professor notes that two-thirds of the people moving to Austin are under the age of 35.

Myers says one of the main reasons for the drop in the number of clubs in Austin because of inflated land prices.

Myers cited the closing of the Armadillo World Headquarters, which was replaced by an IBM office building; the recent closing of the Silver Dollar, a country-western club that

will be replaced by a high-tech facility, and the razing of Xalapeno Charlie's to build an office complex.

But Hank B. Vick, manager of the successful club Steamboat 1874, said in Austin's "Third Coast" magazine that club managers and owners must shoulder much of the blame.

More than one customer has complained that many Austin clubs drive away customers by starting their shows as late as midnight, even on work days, and charge excessive cover charges.

"I think the creativity is still here, but Austin is really lacking a point of putting all this together again," says Lewis Carp, a record shop owner and local promoter. "We have bars in town, but there's not really a scene in Austin anymore."

"I think Austin has become what people who have moved here want it to be," he said. "People want to make it Houstonish or Dallasish."

"I don't know if Austin has gone to sleep or not, or if we can wake it up again," said Carp. "People in the area are still trying, but they've suffered (financially)."

Carp, 32, says the younger generation has turned to "canned" music and frequent Sixth Street, Austin's answer to New Orleans' Bourbon Street.

John T. Davis, a music writer for the Austin American-Statesman, doesn't take as dim a view of the city's music outlets.

"It's a cyclical thing that's happening," he said. "We're going through a decline right now, but I don't think that spells the end of the scene here."

Davis notes several clubs closed about five years ago with the opening of disco clubs, which were then replaced by punk and new wave clubs.

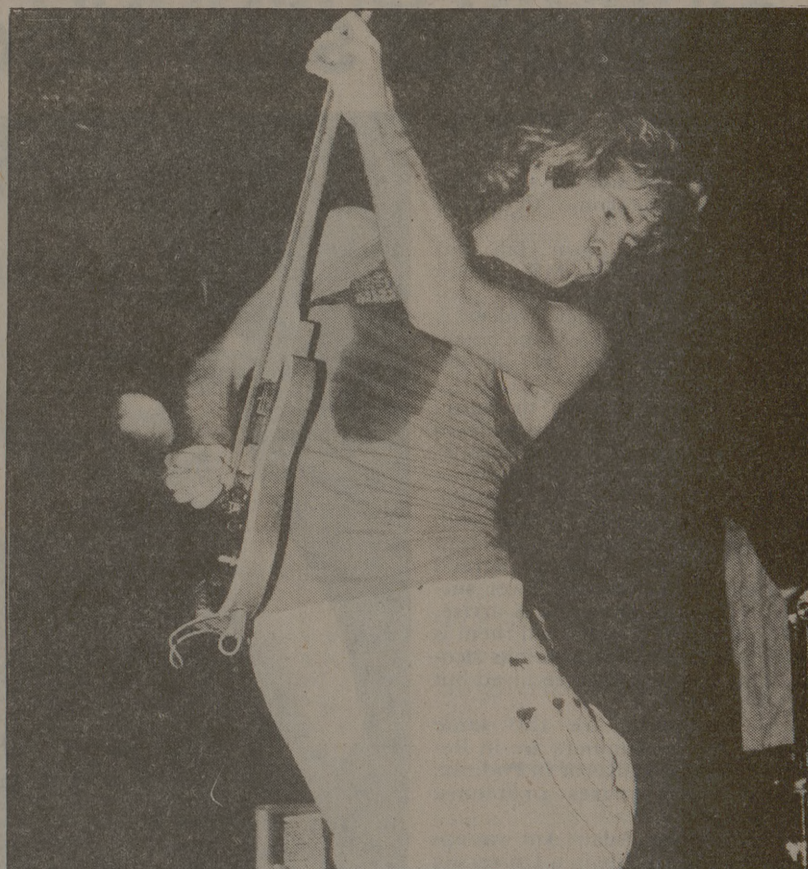
"Right now, musically, there's not much innovation, not much new input," says Davis. "But the scene keeps on going. I think we're more resilient."

"In the long run if Austin is going to maintain its reputation as an oasis between the two coasts, it has to keep two things going," he said. "It has to maintain its water ... and its music."

Gloria Moore, director of visitor development for the Austin Chamber of Commerce, says business and civic leaders recognize the value of the city's music industry and are anxious to help preserve it.

Gammage suggests that the popularity of the Public Broadcasting Service's country-western show "Austin City Limits" has given a false impression to people around the country.

"A lot of people still think its tumbleweed and cowboy boots," he said, explaining that Austin's live music runs the gamut from country to jazz and from reggae to R&B.



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