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20TH ANNIVERSARY SXSW STORIES



I have so many amazing memories from SXSW that it's hard to pick just one, from getting totally tongue-tied in the presence of Tony Bennett to discovering the 16-year old Conor Oberst in a tent outside the Electric Lounge. But my favorite SXSW story comes from the year when Texas Governor Ann Richards gave the keynote. Following her speech, and after shaking hands with



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To a Conference
 by Rich Malley

O, Southbysouthwestia,
 All-consuming bitch
 Who said she'd in the end
 Leave me famous and rich
 Whose success vows are
 spoken
 With nary a word
 Where a consolation token
 Is spotting the Langford
 When beer becomes food
 And barbecue a tonic
 Where outlanders consume
 Mexican food like the chronic
 How I stand in awe
 At your thundering host
 Their lucre? Our merchants
 Dig it the most
 Whose Black hand my
 Swenson
 Did place twixt the Grulke
 'Midst the unsigned hordes
 Odd smelling and sulky
 O, Southbysouthwestia,
 You love-murmuring stoat
 Pour not one more draft
 Again down my throat,
 Temptress, force me not
 To quaff one more free beer
 No, never again
 Least not 'til next year!

executives from SXSW and the Chronicle, Gov. Richards was introduced to the gaggle of rock critics and music reporters waiting to meet her. "And who are these people?" she asked her aide. "These are all music critics," the aide answered. "Oh really?" replied the Governor. And then looking at us, she asked sweetly, "And you people can actually make a living doing that?"

—Jim Testa, *Jersey Beat*

Giant Sand, Liberty Lunch, 1994

You know it's a good show when a tripped-out major label A&R rep puts one of those Texas-big roaches on your shoulder in the middle of *Loretta and the Insect World* and it doesn't even seem surreal. Giant Sand circa Glum was epic, a band expanding sound and minds and, on this night, personnel, for what amounted to an hour long Americana-psychedelia review. Paula Jean Brown. Joey Burns. John Convertino. Susan Cowsill. Vicki Peterson. Rainier Ptacek. Susan Voelz. All of them were up on there on the stage. In spirit, so was California country crooner Pappy Allen, who'd passed away a few months earlier. There may or may not have been a piano player (Robert Lloyd? Chris Cacavas?), and I can no longer remember if Victoria Williams was with them this year or the next one. What I *do* recall is, late in the set, Howe Gelb looking towards a skinny blonde guy at the corner of the stage. "You Chuck?" he wondered. "Come on up." By that point, there was no place for Chuck Prophet to plug in, but that didn't really matter. On this night, everyone in Austin was in Giant Sand.

—Jason Cohen

The SXSW softball tourney: A beautiful thing. One year — must have 1990 or so — I showed up at the field with a head-splitting Shiner hangover and a terrific-looking blond. I hadn't packed any appropriate shoes, so I played in my cowboy boots. I didn't figure that would be a problem, since the Print Media team had been quickly eliminated in previous years, but I wound up playing three games in those damn boots. I couldn't walk for three days. The now-defunct fanzine Texas Beat later ran a full-page picture of me swinging futilely in my "cowboy cleats."

—Chris Morris, *Hollywood Reporter*

For us, the last ten years of winter break in Austin are at best a blur. The blurriest by far was in 1999, when me and bandmate, Alan, got up early for Lonesome Bob's noon show at the Yard Dog. We remained mostly upright (heh heh) until our 1 am headlining slot at some 6th street cavern where men in Mardi Gras masks invaded the stage. We fought them off bravely, rocked our little socks off, and basked momentarily in the glory before being tossed onto the sidewalk at 2 am by muscular security men and sat sobbing with our backs to the door.

—Jon Langford, *Waco Brothers*



In 1990, Dumptruck flew down, so we had to borrow gear and rent a car. We stopped by the conference on our way out of town, but couldn't find parking. We ended up parking in a bank garage nearby. Thirty minutes later, we returned to the garage, which had been locked...with our car and gear inside. After trying everything to get inside, we sent our bass player to the police station with the excuse that his asthma



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medication was in the car and it was an emergency. An hour or so later, the security guard showed up and unlocked the gate. We realized later that our bass player should have stashed the weed in his pocket before visiting the police.

—Seth Tiven, **Dumptruck**

1987 and the Wagoneers at the Hole in the Wall remains an indelible memory. Mid-set, an angry woman stood up and began reading out one band member for "soiling" her daughter. Later, on my way to the exit, a butch cowgirl grabbed my laminate and read it, demanding I stay for "the best band in Austin" and planted me at a table full of her friends, most looking like Ann Richards in heat. She was right, though, because when 2 Nice Girls took the stage and began with *Sweet Jane* mashed with Joan Armatrading's *Love and Affection*, it was something very, very special.

—Jim Fouratt

It was SXSW 1994 and I was the publicist for Killbilly. Killbilly's live show was as exciting and immediate as any punk show from the previous decade. I was forcing myself to talk to writers at the back of the room instead of enjoying the rock in the front of the stage. Then one of my formative punk heroes, Jello Biafra, jumped on stage and joined Killbilly in singing *Too Drunk To Fuck* and *Will The Fetus Be Aborted*. I had no choice but to give up all premise of schmoozing in order to start a pit in front of the stage.

—Nan Warshaw, **Bloodshot**

An independent individualist to this day, Mojo provided this rollicking ride of an audio tale. Be forewarned, this contains strong language, but no goat. Click on his picture to get the whole darned story!

—Mojo Nixon »

Coax showcased with Welsh wonders Catatonia in 1996. They were the hottest UK band, and it was a great "networking" opportunity. Our guitarist loudly speculated to Cerys that she may be related to me, our surnames both being Matthews. Cerys, downing pints like peanuts, was not impressed. Her irritation grew when I suggested as an alternative that if we got married, she wouldn't need to change her surname either. Things went down hill from there. I topped the evening off nicely by informing Cerys that their new song, *Mulder & Scully*, would never be a hit in the UK, as no one would get it. I believe it later stalled at number 3.

—Mark Matthews (Coax, **The Dentists**)

My first SXSW in 1987 was also my first 'adult' foray to Austin. I got to town, registered and logged my first-ever walk down East 6th Street. It was Wednesday night and I ducked into a rather sad shot bar. I listened to a singer/songwriter who looked like he'd logged a few road miles and sang some of the best songs I'd heard in a while. As I left, I noticed there was a tip jar with a small placard touting the man onstage, Ray Wylie Hubbard. It was then that I knew I was in Austin, home of



many a legend, and each of 'em trying to make a living.

—**Cary Baker, conqueroo**

I was attending a SXSW Music Festival panel in the mid-'90s, on a topic I now can't really remember — something having to do with sexism and the differences between men and women, though. At some point, the topic veered to how men and women differently approach sex. A then-unknown Marilyn Manson was in the audience, dressed in full regalia including the white contact lens, and he raised his hand to comment that he's "more of a cuddler."

—**Mara Schwartz, Bug Music**

One of the best things about SXSW is catching a band you fall in love with on the ground level. I'll never forget stumbling into a show for the then unknown At the Drive In, or seeing Peaches ratchet up the raunch for a crowd of drunk rockers. But one of my favorite memories is getting the chance to chat with Jack White before the White Stripes explosion. He'd just finished playing to a packed house and talking to a punk legend, and, seemingly reeling from the latter, White turned and asked, "Do you know who that was? Jello Biafra!" It's funny to think of such a huge superstar once being so starstruck himself.

—**Jennifer Maerz, *The Stranger***

In 1994, I recall seeing Congo Norvell, a cabaret blues act, sharing a rather unlikely bill with the Sir Douglas Quintet at Antone's. Congo Norvell, featuring former members of the Bad Seeds and fresh in from Los Angeles, drew a colorful assortment of fringe dwellers, including several drag kings (women who dress as men) who made the road trip from L.A. with the band. Most of Congo Norvell and their contingent stuck around for the Sir Douglas Quintet and a wonderful co-mingling of conjunto fans and gay bar devotees danced the night away to the uniquely Texas sounds of Doug Sahm and Augie Meyers.

—**Randy Haecker, Sony Legacy Recordings**

In 1994, Reprise Records was releasing the new Texas Tornados album and we celebrated with a party at the Hole in the Wall. We sent out a postcard invite that said "Have a cold one and a hot one," serving tamales cooked up special by one of Doug's San Antonio homeboys. Near the end of the set, as a special only-in-Austin occurrence, Elvis Presley's original drummer D.J. Fontana walked in the door and took over the sticks. Talk about a dream come true for both me and Tornado bassist Speedy Sparks, who might just love early Elvis more than me. Surely the Big E. was smiling down us from somewhere.

—**Bill Bentley, Warner Brothers Records**

Probably my favorite SXSW moment was the Tom Waits show that happened on one day's notice — maybe five or six years ago. Such a sight to see several hundred bleary-eyed and hung-over music biz folks standing in line outside the Convention Center at 8:00 am hoping to score one of the precious tickets to the show that



photo by Martha Grenon

night. Waits was brilliant – one of my favorite shows ever.

—**Sonny Schneidau, House of Blues New Orleans**

It's nice that bands get to play at South by Southwest; it's nice that record-company hacks get to pontificate on the panels, but the conference's true raison d'etre? It's the annual SXSW Softball Tournament. After four nights of ear-pounding guitars and stomach-churning beer, the survivors stagger onto Krieg Fields on Sunday afternoon to do battle on the diamond. The past seven tournaments ended in a championship showdown that pitted the Yankee-like, corporate-minded, free-agent-stocked Clubs & Talent Buyers Team against the scruffy, scrappy underdogs, the Print Media Team. And last year, the Ink-Stained Wretches thrashed their rivals 14-3, provoking celebratory riots up and down South Congress Avenue.

—**Geoffrey Himes, Washington Post**

My story easily would be the time attorney Jon Blaufarb decided to skinny dip in the Four Seasons pool (circa 1989). When he was later fished out by hotel security, he claimed to be me, thereby getting me some very confusing dirty looks from hotel staffers for the remainder of my stay.

—**Tom DeSavia, ASCAP**

SXSW usually conflicts with the New York St. Patrick's Day parade, so I've experimented with alternative celebrations. One year my brother Ed and I marched down South Congress wearing green hats with a boombox playing Irish uilleann pipers. We waved at passers-by. They stared back at us until the cops made us get off the road. Back then Mojo Nixon's manager Bullethead held an annual after hours party at his hotel and we finished the night singing many apocryphal verses of *Isn't It Grand* with Mojo and Wet Dog. I think that was the last of Bullethead's parties.

—**John Swenson**

Yeah, there was that hilarious time that I got slimed by ACT UP activists who used information obtained through contacts at SXSW HQ regarding my concerns over being assigned a showcase lineup that included Two Nice Girls. Hijinks ensued when my showcase was picketed and boycotted and my reputation was savaged by accusations of homophobia. We laughed for days!

—**Michelle Shocked**

After our very successful gig in 2003, we were taken to an after hours house party full



of post-show revelers and an unlimited amount of beer. We hung out until 5:00 am then stopped in an IHOP for a post-party breakfast. The restaurant was full of people who hadn't been up all night drinking and we didn't notice the older couple behind us who kept glaring over. We were pretty drunk and our conversation had become loud, profane and sexually explicit. We had just finished eating when the waitress asked us, due to our foul language and loud voices, to vacate the premises immediately. We laughed all the way to the hotel, drunk with the joy of our SXSW triumph and the prospect of being kicked out of IHOP!

—**Alex Skolnik, Savatage and Testament**

An early showcase at Scholz' Beer Garden included the Beat Farmers, Dash Rip Rock and Mojo Nixon. With no dressing room, the band had to use the beer storage area as the back stage. Needless to say the venue was not anticipating the bands consuming nearly ten cases of beer. Being the closest thing to a reasonable character, I was left to deal with the venue on the "missing" beer. The SXSW rep working the venue called Roland on the walkie talkie. I clearly remember Roland responding "you put those bands in the beer storage room? What did anyone expect?"

—**Scott Ambrose Reilly**

In 1996 at the Split Rail, there was a showcase for the oft-hyped, oft-misunderstood nascent brand of rootsy punk alternately called No Depression, insurgent country, or whatever. Scouts with expense accounts were rampant with a line down the block before doors opened. On our first real exposure to the venal snake pit that is the music industry, I soon found myself in the bathroom throwing up due to nerves and tequila. Next to me was a guy doing the same thing. Rhett Miller of the Old 97s walked in and said "oh, you two should meet: Rob from Bloodshot meet Ryan Adams from Whiskeytown."

—**Rob Miller, Co-founder Bloodshot Records**

Bloody Cracker's bloody management buying me far too many bloody margaritas. Leaving the La Zona Rosa at three in the morning very, very drunk. Seeing them again at 8:00 am the same morning at the Austin airport feeling very sorry for myself. They kindly introduced me to *Resolve*, an instant hangover cure. My drinking has never looked back! Great gig!

—**Martin Goldschmidt, Cooking Vinyl**

One year, the usual rush to see music left an ASCAP rep still hungry for dessert. She was promised pie at some point in the night if she'd just hurry up and join the posse. Which she did, only because well, she'd been promised pie. Throughout the night, she'd ask about "The Promise of Pie". It became a running joke. If anyone from the group was asked who was biggest buzz band, the answer was, *The Promise of Pie*. *The Promise of Pie* became very popular by the end of the conference. Silly, yes. True, yes. The worst part? She never did get her pie (that year).

—**John Porter, Mood Indigo Entertainment**



If I could relive a SXSW past, it would be the first time Doug Sahm took me to San Antonio. Along the way showed me his parent's homestead, Gruene Hall, the house

where he was raised, boarded up clubs where he saw his heroes and the icehouses of the West Side. It's impossible to narrow down a favorite SXSW gig, but a standout is Doug Sahm with his amazing band with the West Side Horns. Doug was on stage for almost three hours, the club was closed and, just when you thought you'd heard everything, Doug pulls out *Mack The Knife*.

—**Holger Petersen, Stony Plain Records**

I believe I witnessed the quintessential moment of SXSW record-weaseltude; it was in the lobby of the Four Seasons, of course. I saw a friend yukking it up on his cell, and after a few moments it became clear that the person on the other end of the line was also on the other side of the room.

—**Simon Glickman**

In 86/87, I came down to see a band I'd just signed, Doctor's Mob. They took me to Zilker Park, where they smoked pot, and I made some embarrassing claim of being "high on life," which I will never live down. I later realized that foregoing med school after having taken every frigging pre-med course was the right decision. If a card-carrying member of the Bronx High SF Club could visit Texas and weird looking people with piercings and long hair could be that nice, bonding over Hootenanny and Big Star's 3rd, I was probably in the right business and the right world.

—**Michael Krumper, Razor & Tie**

In 1996, Dolly Varden's first album was getting some 'buzz'. The showcase was packed with industry-types so we were pretty nervous. The sound guy was wasted on something, probably a combo of booze and whip-its. He came onstage during set up and yelled, "All eyes here!" pointing to his own face. He said to Mark, our guitarist, "Cool it, Tarzan!" (a nickname that lives on to this day). Next, he gave our singer Diane a full-on top to bottom grope from behind. We were stunned, but it was time to play. I have no idea how the sound was, but we went over well and got signed. The soundguy was later escorted away.

—**Steve Dawson, Dolly Varden**

The hot ticket in the Spring of '94 was Johnny Cash at Emo's. The appearance coincided with Rick Rubin's debut production of Cash's American release. It was set up to bring Johnny to the Gen-X's and the alternative rock audience, as well as to the music industry. Emo's was packed – the crowd was all cowboy hats and tattoos. Johnny played a nervous yet confident acoustic set and felt totally comfortable with the crowd. It was magic. At the end of the show we hurried backstage to get a quick picture with Johnny.

—**Kathy Marcus & John T. Kunz, Waterloo Records**

Last year, I spent two nights going out with my 15 year-old and despite the fact the kid had to wake me up after I nodded out in the bleachers of Emo's one night, we turned each other on to loads of music. He led me to the Raveonettes. I convinced him the New York Dolls could rock real hard for old farts. In between, we both dug Fat Boy Slim, the Kills, Bloc Party, and Blanche, and we both dismissed the Futureheads and Louis XIV as overrated. Thanks to SXSW, we know we share the same family values.

—**Joe Nick Patoski**

The hotel that's now the Radisson on Town Lake was once the Sheraton Crest, the

Mojo Nixon

scene of SXSW II. As Sheratons go it was, shall we say, funky, but few hotels were willing to risk a horde of rampaging rockers in those days, so it was home.

There were only two rooms available for panels, a big hall that divided with a moveable wall, and the sound for this space was run out of a box in the hall. All was going perfectly smoothly when suddenly people started popping out of both rooms saying "What's going on?" A quick inspection showed that the panelists' audio from one room was suddenly appearing in the other room, and vice versa.

Our crack technical director, Brad First, was called upon to investigate, and he opened the control closet where the sound equipment was. "I can't believe it!" he said. "Tube equipment!" He poked around some. "And it's melted!"

It had indeed, and, amazingly enough, the hotel didn't have their technical guy working weekends. I don't remember how this got fixed — maybe everyone just had to talk louder — but somehow SXSW struggled through.

—**Ed Ward**

Some of my favorite SXSW moments were stumbling in on bands I didn't intend to see, like the Japanese band, MONO, which I think played opposite the big Tom Waits showcase four years ago. I decided to bag the crowd and walked into Maggie's and heard this instrumental trio that sounded like the second coming of Pink Floyd. They built huge crescendos like a rocket taking off and other times let you down gently like a hot air balloon. This band, like the Tom Waits songs says, was "big in Japan," but virtually unknown in the U.S. It was one of those amazing shows that everyone in the room shared, and as we filed out to Sixth Street, walking a few feet off the ground, we shared knowing smiles. We had just seen one of the best performances ever, totally unexpected.

Another funny moment was the way my music badge had me treated like a star, bigger than some stars. I was on line to see Tito & Tarantula, standing behind director Quentin Tarantino in or around 1999. The place was packed and as the doorman was selecting people to let in, he pointed to me, but kept out the famous director. I was about to tell him, hey, he's a lot more important than me... but what the h. I didn't. Great little show by a band that has done too little since.

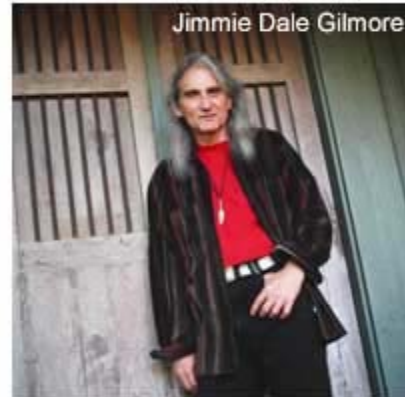
Lastly, I remember going to dinner with some punk band from the Midwest, name now forgotten in 1996 and watching them have real trouble ordering from the menu at the Cajun place on Sixth. Trouble was, their road manager explained, they had never eaten in a restaurant that wasn't a drive thru before. He was serious. That was the mark of some real punks.

—**Brad Kava, *San Jose Mercury News***

"Why do you love Saddam so much? He crashed those planes into those buildings!" It's not really the punch line you'd expect, but it does sound like the set-up for a bad joke when a Kiwi, a Pom, a Scot, a couple of Norwegians and an American gal stumble into a hotel room for a drink. Considering I didn't know any of them it was a perfect introduction to SXSW's multicultural hues and a lesson as to what happens when you walk out of your room clinking bottles together and asking the hallway loudly if anyone wants a drink. Bet you can guess who said what, though...

—**Steve Newall, *New Zealand Music Industry Commission***

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in 1993. Arthur was a truly great singer and songwriter — I have heard that he was the only other songwriter besides Chuck Berry who had songs covered by the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and Bob Dylan. (Respectively: *Anna*, *You Better Move On* and *Sally Sue Brown*). With his unique blend of R & B, rock, and even country influences he was a major star in the early days of rock'n'roll. However, he had left the music business for a variety of reasons – personal, health-related and stereotypical bad treatment by the businessmen. This was his first public performance after years of obscurity and he was very apprehensive about the show. A few songs into the set the audience (many of whom, I suspect, had never heard of him) were applauding and cheering with the wild enthusiasm that can make a musician fall in love with Austin. During one of their extended ovations I glanced over and noticed the giant Arthur with the giant gleaming smile was wiping tears from his eyes. He told the crowd it was a very good way to make a comeback. Arthur succumbed to heart failure later that summer. He had just finalized a publishing deal, with Bug Music, probably the first good one he ever had. It makes me glad to know that we were all part of giving him a little bit of the recognition and appreciation he so deserved.

—**Jimmie Dale Gilmore**

By far, the most exciting moment in my 14-year history was seeing Johnny Cash perform at Emo's. Standing on the sidewalk outside the completely packed way-over-capacity club, it was just exciting to be part of the moment. Johnny's limo pulled up and he got out and walked within half an arm's length of me. Everyone was so respectful, and he walked right into the club. We all knew it was history in the making. I finally got in to see the show with my friends from Montreal in tow. We were beyond speaking and could only smile and sing along.

—**Julie Meacham, SXSW Information Crew Chief**

Jello Biafra falling into a hole backstage at Esther's Follies in 1994 ... Having a private performance by Kris Kristofferson in the office of The Continental Club prior to his showcase ... CC Adcock throwing a live chicken into the crowd at the end of his showcase, horrifying and angering his entire audience while trying to top Southern Culture On The Skids' practice of throwing fried chicken into the audience ... Getting told F*ck you, we're playin' by a showcasing act when I

informed them they'd overrun their time; shrugging my shoulders and telling the sound man to kill the power (with a member of The Band on keyboards) ...

—**Wayne Zinkand, SXSW Stage Manager**

In 1998 I was working with this great band from the UK called Cable (r.i.p.). They were virtually unheard of here in the U.S., but had three huge fans in Portland who journeyed all the way to Austin for the show. Don't ask me how they knew about them. The band played in the corner of the front room of what was then Maggie Mae's – very compact. The three fans got so worked up at the showcase that the bouncer ended up throwing them out because he thought they had got into a fight with each other. 2500 miles to get tossed out on your tuchas on the third song – that's dedication.

It was a Friday night, SXSW 2000, and it started to rain profusely after all the showcases ended. I didn't have an umbrella and was running furiously down the street so I could get to an after hours party without getting soaked first. I was with two cute fellas I had met earlier and was enjoying the attention. While we were running down the street, I dropped my badge. Half running and half bending over, I reached to pick it up and my skirt split wide open all the way up the rear seam. Doh! I went to the party anyway!

—**Leah Selvidge, Otherworldly Contact**

During the winter in Chicago, the prospect of visiting Austin and South by Southwest in March means there's always light at the end of the ice-cold tunnel. And I always return with something to savor. There was the morning I was blown away by what looked like a flashback from Godspell: the immaculately white-robed, incredibly caffeinated Polyphonic Spree. Or the sight of Johnny Cash with an acoustic guitar, fans literally at his feet, playing songs from his first Rick Rubin-produced album. Or the time that Ike Turner swept on stage at Antone's in a black fedora and bellowed, "Hello, Houston!" What's my favorite memory of all? I always think it's the one I'm about to have, this March when I tunnel out yet again.

—**Greg Kot, Chicago Tribune**

Either the first or second SXSW I attended — and this must have been 1991 or '92 — was one of the most enjoyable, spontaneous times I've had in my life. Austin was all new to me, very exotic and of course utterly delectable. Coming in from the Northeast in March means leaving late winter cold and wet behind and being plunged into Springtime in full bloom, perfumed with the woody smell of barbeque smoke and Mexican spices.

Being relatively clueless I tended to be wide open to whatever happenings folks wanted to drag me to. One night a New York Times writer saw me walking on Sixth Street, sensed I was at loose ends and ordered me into her car. I was totally lost as we went out highways, down side streets and wound up at a shabby looking place called the Broken Spoke and saw Junior Brown, Kelly Willis et al tear that playhouse down, while the Spin staff of that era shook 'em down. We next headed to a strip mall, jammed into a standard gritty metal bar and saw Junkyard opening for the Black Crowes — all of this being absolutely new music to me — and so on. On that same trip, on another night, the pop critic from the Newark Star Ledger grabbed hold of me and shepherded me to see Shoulders at the University of Texas Canteen, then some wonderful, weird one-woman musical play elsewhere on campus and then insisted we eat at some posh place to "get away from all the damned Tex

Mex!"

So the diversity and unpredictability of it all made me giddy with delight. And perhaps more importantly hanging out with a bunch of music business professionals who were taking the opportunity to fully indulge their inner music geek and share their personal obscure obsessions and/or guilty pleasures.

I continue to go with little or no agenda and just trust the kindness of strangers to guide me to new surprises via their fulsome gushing over some act I've never heard of.

—Howard Wuelfing, Howlin' Wuelf Media

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