

Rock 'n' roll tour of America



Clockwise from bottom: a giant cupcake is par for the course in weird Austin; The Grates; Austin locals wear their love of music loud and proud; Diego's Umbrella.

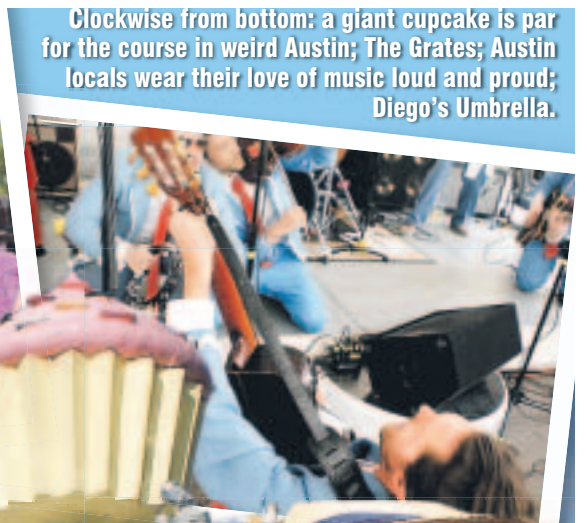
links

everything Austin: Get the lowdown on all that's on offer in the Live Music Capital of the World, www.austintexas.org

join the club: The pick of venues to start your musical adventure, take in free 6pm shows and a friendly crowd at SoCo's Continental Club, www.continentalclub.com

don't mess with Texas: Wear your new cowboy boots for Tex Mex and live music at Guero's Taco Bar, a must-have Texas experience, www.guerostacobar.com

afternoon delights: Give your ears a break and cool off at gigantic Barton Springs swimming lake, a big natural springs with fish and turtles, www.ci.austin.tx.us/parks/bartonsprings.htm



Blog with Mary at <http://blogs.news.com.au/heraldsun/rocknrolltour/>

The tunes and beer flow freely in the "live music capital of the world", writes **Mary Bolling**

WE arrive at the Yard Dog on bikes and dozens of people are already filing into the tiny Austin art gallery.

But no one is stopping to look at the eclectic collection. The spring sun is beating down with bite and the beer out the back is a buck a glass.

Under a tent, six gringos in mariachi gear sound-check guitars, violins and an accordion.

Three songs into a roaring set and the lead guitarist is on his back on the cement patio, shredding as if his life depended on it.

It's only gone noon on a Saturday and I'm falling in love with San Franciscan gypsy-pirate band Diego's Umbrella.

After the show, lead singer Vaughn tells me they have been on the road for more than a month.

"My girlfriend really loves me right now," he says, laughing and shaking his head.

I laugh along and my heart doesn't quite break at the girlfriend news.

After all, I'm hardly monogamous — I've been falling for about 40 bands a day since Tuesday. And there's still two days of South by Southwest Music Festival to go.

Known universally as SXSW, the Austin music festival is in its 23rd year, with almost 2000 bands lining up for six days of shows.

But be warned, for SXSW you can forget everything you thought you knew about music festivals.

Held at 88 venues across the city including cafes, pizza joints, video shops and a church, the

vast majority of shows (hosted by record labels, music magazines, radio stations and other music industry players) are free.

Some promoters are so determined that a big, buzzing crowd show up (to create all-important "hype" for their act), they even offer free beer.

And so, to me, Austin seems not entirely unlike heaven.

It's only spring, but the self-proclaimed "live music capital of the world" is already hitting 30C most days.

Built on beautiful Colorado River, the city — which is the state capital of Texas — is green, flat and easy to cycle across.

Almost every bar has a beer garden and not one lacks a stage.

And it doesn't take much to see the impact of the popular local motto, "Keep Austin weird".

SXSW certainly gives the city another push in that direction.

Musicians and music lovers have booked up every bed in town and plenty more couches.

Main streets feature an array of busking musicians from all over the world, trying to finance their Texas trip.

And with daily events kicking off at noon and continuing into the small hours, by the final days of the festival, most music-goers are wearing a crazy look in their eyes.

In the weeks leading up to the festival, music blogs buzz with recommendations of which shows to see and where.

While festival-goers can pay big bucks for an access-all-areas ticket, many shows are free if you RSVP in advance, including the Saturday party where Kanye West played a secret show, and a huge *Fader* magazine-sponsored "fort" where a too-cool line-up of local and international bands rock out every day, and free alcohol never seems to run out.

Many more accept walk-ins, and the pick is the daily evening concert at the Auditorium Shores

Stage, on the banks of beautiful Lady Bird Lake.

Sitting on grassy slopes with a few thousand others, I take in rocking indie darlings the Cold War Kids, and beautifully Dylan-esque singer-songwriter M Ward. (And yep, I'm in love with both.)

Erykah Badu and Explosions in the Sky are other big names to play the free series.

While the majority of shows are held downtown and in the hip neighbourhood around the University of Texas, arguably the best slice of Austin is on South Congress Ave, or SoCo to locals.

Great Tex-Mex at Guero's comes with a huge backyard and outdoor stage where adults and kids alike dance to old-timey country bands.

More bands jam at the back of Home Slice pizza place.

At the Continental Club, an upbeat western swing band has an after-work crowd all two-stepping furiously.

In a vacant block, a row of silver Airstream caravans sell delicious snacks.

In among all the food and music are shops pushing cowboy boots, cheap vintage clothing, quirky art and, of course, guitars.

No wonder, then, that Aussie bands are so devoted to the event. And judging by this year's performances by the Drones, Lenka, An Horse and Dappled Cities, they are loved in return.

At Peckerheads, Brisbane band The Grates get with the mantra, with singer Patience — dressed as Wonder Woman — demanding a fan offer his shoulders. She then jumps on to wave a gymnastics ribbon over an adoring crowd while singing 19-20-20.

It's a good lesson about crazy Austin: you'll fall in love, but the "live music capital of the world" will definitely love you back.

Next week: Desert crazy — weird sights and sounds in Tucson, Arizona

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