

Austin's Coffeehouse Circuit

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by Joe Mitchell

Coffee is my god, my goddess, my Buddha and every other deity graven or otherwise ever raised from man's collective soul. Coffee and I consume each other with an extremist fanaticism that makes the Ayatollah and National Front skinheads look like poster children for the League of Mellow. Pleased to meet you, don't try to guess my name. I am a barista. I am only as good as the last latté or cappuccino I extracted and frothed. I am a pusher of the occidental world's most popular and affordable form of speed. I am *the man* all the people going to work at the buttcrack of dawn are waitin' for every weekday morning at Ruta Maya Rio Grande.

Austin, despite the deadly summer climate, has become a huge coffee market, a fact forever embossed upon the city's psyche by the recent invasion of the squeaky clean minions of Seattle's Starbucks. If you count all the mall and campus carts as well as the 20-plus freestanding coffeehouses, there are more than 50 gourmet coffee establishments in the city serving some sort of specialty roast drip product and, nine and a half times out of 10, espresso. Thirteen of them offer live music at least once a week, with the number shrinking to 12 when Java Jive ceases its live offerings this month. The number will most likely shrink to 11 for awhile if Chicago House, which has lost the lease on its grand old building at Trinity near Sixth Street, can't find a new space by month's end (see sidebar). And no matter how you crunch, one thing is for certain: There's something happening out there at night in the coffee dives of Austin.

Music mixed with caffeine is a different animal from that laced with alcohol. The reasons for this difference and the overall appeal of music in coffeehouses are as numerous as the people who work, play and, most importantly, sip coffee and listen in them. But there is one thing most persons involved with coffeehouses seem to agree on: Coffeehouse listeners are a good deal more attentive to and appreciative of the musical process and a lot less obsessed with some sort of well-packaged product. The emphasis is art, not commerce. Boozers wanna rock. Imbibers of Mochaccino want their brains picked.

"I think music in coffeehouses is much more focused on the process of songwriting," says Pam Peltz, a solo singer-songwriter, guitarist for 21st Century Blues and longtime Austin veteran of both bar and coffee venues. "Music in clubs is more promotional oriented. You tend to practice and polish more before you play bars. Coffeehouses are a good place to try new things and work stuff out."

"The atmosphere is a lot quieter here," says well-named Café Solaire booking agent and barista prima Kim Coffey. "I've had people from bands say it's the quietest place they've ever played. They love it. People come in, sit and listen, and go 'Wow, who's this?' People actually stick around and get some insight into what's going on in the music."

There is also the ubiquitous sentiment among observers that the overall social environment in coffeehouses is far more relaxed and less likely to be threatening than in a bar. "I worked in bars before working here," says Coffey. "It's much more pleasant to go out on the sidewalk along Congress and have a conversation with customers than to hear, 'Hey baby, can I have a Coors Light and your phone number?'"

Some people also believe there's a greater psycho-social phenomenon going on that's contributing to the popularity of coffeehouses. "In an age of increased sobriety," says Café Solaire co-owner Nina Marlow, "people need a place to gather socially as a community, and coffeehouses offer that." If sobriety is not of

the utmost importance to one's social needs, Solaire does have a beer and wine license.

Hildegard's Tricia Mitchell sees something even deeper at work: "In the Nineties and the age of AIDS, people need a place to gather where they're not made vulnerable." People don't ask people out for drinks anymore. Now, it's coffee. In my nerve- and ear-bending adventures throughout Austin's world of java, one thing became quite obvious: There are four distinguishable types of coffeehouse/live music venues in town. There are the "Stalwarts," the old guys, the establishment types. Hell, call 'em old farts and I'll bet a \$12,000 Gaggia espresso machine they wouldn't even blink. If you're a Stalwart, you've been around for awhile, have a lot of respect and notoriety outside Austin, and tend to showcase more established local acts, roadshows, and even feature a few newer Austin talents who strike your fancy from time to time. Second are the "Contenders." They're relatively new, yet very strong. They book a lot of top-flight local acts and will most likely be Stalwarts in five years if not sooner. The third type are the "Young and the Restless (Y&R)." This is the most ubiquitous and wildest type of coffeehouse venue found in this youthful city. These are the venues where the booking reps are willing to take risks, and lots of new artists get a chance to try out their stuff no matter how off the wall they may be. Don't expect a nonchalant evening at a Y&R. You're most likely gonna get challenged. The fourth type are the grit-deprived "Upscales" in West Austin who attract the more affluent citizenry of this *grande ville*. Don't expect to see the Fuckemos stumbling about in a cheap Mexican downer haze at an Upscale. Look for your mom and dad doing so.

Not all of Austin's coffeehouse music venues fit neatly into one category or another. There are a few crossover coffeehouses that overtly exhibit symptoms of at least two categories. In fact, if you looked closely enough, you'd find a few far-flung genes from at least one of the other pools in all the coffeehouse venues. There are no pedigrees, but some mutts are a lot more obvious than others.

The Stalwart of Stalwarts is obvious to anyone who has been in Austin for at least a week. It's the Cactus Cafe. Located inside the Union building on the UT Campus just off Guadalupe near 24th, the Cactus has been booking some of the most celebrated singer-songwriters in the world since 1981 when booking guru Griff Luneburg took over the music helm. The list of the big-time names to hit Cactus is endless. The list of people who lifted off big-time careers there is not short, either. Lyle Lovett, Nanci Griffith, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Lucinda Williams, Butch Hancock, and a host of others are in no small way indebted to the hallowed walls of the Cactus. Mr. Luneburg has quite an ear.

Newer acts often get a shot at the Cactus in midweek slots if they please Luneburg's discriminating ears. Some local talent discoveries of Luneburg's of the last few years that have garnered some modicum of notoriety around Austin and elsewhere include Michele Solberg (though Chicago House may make an argument that they got there first), Meredith Louise Miller, Aunt Beanie's First Prize Beets, Abra Moore, and the Librarians, among others. Most of these acts played elsewhere before being granted the stage of Cactus, but it's Luneburg's imprimatur that has bestowed respectability upon them, giving them a foot in the door at other venues in and outside Austin. If you are a new act wondering if you've got the stuff to make it at Cactus, there is an open mike on most Mondays. Luneburg says he's always there listening for something new. If you can make it at the Cactus, you can probably make it anywhere.

The Cactus' only real weakness is coffee. It offers one type of specialty drip coffee, usually Colombian, which is a lot better than Folgers, but in such a venerated place one would expect a little more. The most shocking thing about Cactus is that there is no espresso machine despite, much to my chagrin and confusion, listing a latté and cappuccino on its menu board. Luneburg promises that a machine is on the way. For those who like to be lubed with alcohol, Cactus has a full liquor bar and several brands of domestic and imported beers.

Appropriately, there are two venues in the type-two land of the Contenders. They are cafezino and Flipnotics. Neither of these venues has been around more than three years, but they are already showing signs of earning premier coffeehouse status.

"It's a varied musical selection," says 'zino co-owner and booking rep Linda Farin of the acts that play her venue on Balcones just south of Northland Drive in the *nouveau riche* Northwest Hills area. 'Zino is a mere six miles from downtown. "We book things from jazz to folk to original. We have everything, really. I'm here almost every night and I want to hear something different. The only thing we don't book is something loud." Music at cafezino may be eclectic to some degree, but not wildly so. They have a more mature clientele and aim to please them. Among Farin's favorite acts that grace the stage at 'zino are Pam Hart, Diana Jones, an all-female *a cappella* trio called the Studebakers, and Nancy Scott.

Cafezino has a good deal of the Upscale type-four blood pulsing through its veins. Like the Cactus, the atmosphere there is comfortable, but the decor is anything but subdued. It's bright and squeaky-clean. Imagine that your garish Jewish Auntie from New Jersey fell in love with the Austin acoustic scene and decided to move down and start her own little place and you'll get the gist of 'zino's look. The shining focal point at 'zino is, of course, the coffee. According to Farin, "I think we have the best coffee in town." She has a good argument. Native New Yorker Farin made me the best latté I've ever tasted in this city from the cleanest espresso machine I've ever seen in my life. When prodded to reveal her bean supplier, Farin wouldn't budge. "We have our sources," she snorted with a big smirk on her face. If you get hungry or have a thirst for more than coffee, 'zino serves food, as well as beer and wine. Music or no, Flipnotics is the coolest dive, bar, restaurant, or whatever in Austin in my, uh, humble opinion. It's an old creaky house with worn wooden floors that used to house Austin Bike Sport. Maybe it's a South-of-the-River thing or something, but Flip is so damned comfortable. It's so cozy that it's the only place where certain unnamed Austin rockers do live interviews and the only place where certain named, mainly me, writers like to conduct interviews. Go ahead Flip, get the big head. I worship thee.

There are two stages at Flip. There's a little tiny one tucked into a corner indoors in what I like to call the "art deco lounge" (only Flightpath rivals Flip in the retro *objets d'art* wars of Austin). The focal point of the lounge when an act isn't playing is an aquarium inside a circa-Kennedy-administration TV set. This is where the open mikes and a lot of the solo acoustic folks play. When louder bands play, it's time to move outside onto the deck which overlooks a tree-covered hill and steep Kinney Avenue, which disappears behind the trees in a sudden right turn. On quiet afternoons, if you let your mind drop its guard enough, it's like you're not in the city, but in some pastoral semi-mountainous milieu.

Unlike its fellow contender, Flip is not always mellow - if indeed it's ever mellow at all. Let's just say that booking rep Mark Kamburis likes to keep his clientele on its toes, giving his venue a good nod to the Y&R category. A solo act may be playing inside on the tiny stage, but most likely it's someone like the Lap Fender King Earthpig who is anything but quiet and anything but orthodox. Outside, it's loud, but not so loud as to wake the neighborhood. This is where hyperactive polkabilly madman Herman the German makes an occasional appearance and where the humongous seven-piece Carol Howell Band has been garnering a following. Other acts frequently found at Flip are Teisco Del Rey, Russ Somers, and Sharecroppers.

Coffee at Flip is good, but not as godlike as cafezino. The service is decent, too, when the baristas-cum-coffee pullers aren't too busy adjusting their nose rings or polishing their tattoos of Elvis. Food is available, though the sandwiches I've experience there are nothing to write home about. For breakfast hounds there are baked goods. As far as non-coffee drinks, there is no alcohol. On weekend nights, BYOB is allowed. If you are feeling adventurous, Flip does stock the spectrum of Eat Me brand drink products such as Black Lemonade, Brainwash, and the best-named cola in the world, Fukola Cola. So if you don't want to get wired, you can always get a burning sensation in your chest cavity and turn your tongue blue.

There are tons of Y&Rs. At last count, there were three Ruta Mayas in Austin with another one about to open inside Antone's, of all places. Don't worry, I won't start calling the so-called "home of the blues" a coffeehouse. Ruta Maya downtown is a 'tweener, an equal mix of Y&R and contender. It's placed here

rather than with the contenders because of its youth and the fact that former Texas Tavern booking man Tom Bowie is a wildman. Chances and change don't seem to faze him. For example, Hildegard basically grew up on the Ruta Maya stage. They started out as a rather tame and charming female duet with some cool songs, some of them kind of goofy. They jumped from open mike to best of open mike, to gigging regularly at RM. Even after they electrified, got a drummer, and got loud, Bowie still had them playing on a regular basis despite the fact that their sheer volume made it virtually impossible for the baristas to hear customers' orders. Other noteworthy acts to grace the stage at RM frequently include: Pam Peltz, 21st Century Blues, Pam Mayo, Rene Woodward, and a new experimental art band featuring former Stick People called Gumbopolis.

Ruta Maya downtown is huge. It's in an old warehouse that's done everything from house the *Austin American-Statesman* to serve as a set for the second installment of the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. This hollowness of the room does not make it the most conducive setting for perfect sound production. The waves tend to bounce around a lot. But I can't help but love the high ceiling which contributes to surprisingly cool temperatures during the summer. RM also allows smoking and has its own tobacconist for those who like to mix vices.

There has been much debate over the merits of Ruta Maya coffee. Being a salesman of their product, I've heard the adjective "gamey" as a complaint about the taste lots of times. Yet with the "Best Coffeehouse" accolades in the *Chronicle's* "Best of" Poll, "gamey" obviously doesn't disagree with everyone.

There are two other Ruta Mayas up and running at this time. Both are truer to the Y&R credo than the main location. One is inside the Cyberworld hideout on Manor Road called the Discovery Incubator. Incubator is a weird, cavernous place with lots of computers and lots of obsessive people playing loud, technicolor games on them. The bands that play the Incubator have the option of playing in the big, open space in the middle of the building or inside the studio where one of the engineers will record a DAT of your band's performance if you so wish. Booking rep Nikki Duncan admits, "I book what I like." She likes variety. "I'll book everything from a flamenco guitarist to a rock band. I like blues. I like soul. I like a lot of stuff." Among Duncan's favorite local acts are Olive, Box of Rockets, and Drums and Tuba.

The other Ruta Maya is on Rio Grande in the West Campus area. It's where I spend way too much time playing barista and booking bands. Most of my fave acts have already been mentioned, so here are two new ones: Jeff Thompson and Daniel Bernovic. I'll book anyone who won't incite the tenants upstairs to kill me.

The definitive Y&R is Café Solaire. I must say that CS was the coolest of my first-time visits. The place reeks of youth and energy. Booking agent Coffey is in her early twenties and enthusiastic to the point of having a charmingly childlike hyperactivity (lotsa espresso, eh?), which leads to the bands all looking like fresh-scrubbed kids from UT with smiles plastered on their faces. There's a positive vibe and all the customers seemed to be having a whale of a time while I was there. Things got really happy when the band Selmo Louis broke out in a kazoo solo. I thought I'd died and gone to Poi Dog Pondering heaven. Other bands recommended by Ms. Coffey are Jim Ivey, the Sharecroppers, and the Klems.

The remaining two members of the Young and Restless are Another Cup and Mojo's. Motherly Delores Beard (a lot of her younger clients call her "Momma Beard") at Another Cup books all kinds of music, though she prefers it to be mainly acoustic. Beard says that Another Cup is very homey and she likes showing the rambunctious kids from UT that they can have a good time listening to live music without getting stool-faced on Sixth Street. "A lot of kids come to me and say they didn't know they could have so much fun while sober," says Beard. Her favorite acts are Seventies-cover band King Cheese and acoustic folkie Jan Fikes. Mojo's is a slick, upwardly mobile student dangle-spot in a nifty old house on Guadalupe. It's mostly a Y&R with some ambitions to be an Upscale. Owner Wade Beasely likes to book more alternative-type bands in the two slots he fills each week. His fave acts are wild popsters Rocket Fuel Soda

Pop, rockabilly boy Josh Arnson, Earthpig and Fire, LD 50, and Magneto USA.

Finally, there's Cafe Mozart on Exposition, one of two members of the Upscale Persuasion. Mozart is actually more of a restaurant than coffeehouse, but because it has live music and fine coffee, it fits in here. The music tends to concentrate more on presentation than creation. The biggest musical event of the year, according to proprietor Hans Holland, is Mozart's birthday in January when various vocalists and instrumentalists invade the premises to give their renditions of Mozart's works.

Mozart's Coffee Roasters at Lake Austin Boulevard and Enfield is not as intimidating as the high-real-estate-value location right on the lake might infer. I was able to walk in wearing a pair of shorts and my coveted Tori Amos Euro-Tour T-shirt without the merest hint of a sneer or threat of being tossed into the lake. In fact, it's very laid back and friendly. The music isn't the typical boomer jazz one would expect from an upscale venue. Booking agent/General Manager Gretchen Wighaman likes to stick to songwriting acts like Mary Reynolds, Marshall Styler, and Emily Kaitz. With such acts, MCR could be considered a bleed-over into type two.

So, is there an Austin coffee-house scene? To that question, about half the respondents in my survey of managers and booking people responded with a confused, "Huh?" or "What the hell does that mean?" Of the people who responded affirmatively, all were of the Young and Restless persuasion. Kim Coffey of Solaire and Nikki Duncan of Incubator were the most vehement in their insistence on the scene's existence, sighting the astronomical number of venues and cool acts permeating the city as proof. Both pretty much jumped out of their chairs and did an interpretive dance of coffeehouse life to emphasize their point. Conversely, Griff Luneburg accompanied his negative head rotation with a smirk of incredulity which suggested I had one foot in the State Hospital and the other a little too close to him for comfort. He and others with the weightier venues say there aren't enough quality acts in town to constitute a "scene."

If a "scene" is defined as a coherent hotbed of commercially viable talent and energy that possesses a connective attitudinal thread and common foundation of a certain collective consciousness, like the mid-Eighties "New Sincerity" onslaught of Reivers and Believers or the Texas Folk scene of the Seventies and Eighties that ushered the rise of Nanci Griffith and Lyle Lovett, then the answer to our burning question is a resounding "no."

But if a "scene" is more loosely defined as an overall-unconnected, swirling hodge-podge of immense talent and energy that should inspire enthusiasm among the local music congnescenti and casual music appreciators alike, then the answer is a loud, fat, "Hell yes!" n