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Blessings and Luck Pave Path to Live Music Headquarters

Fans and artists alike are overjoyed to be trapped for three days in a whirlwind that has become synonymous with rock, both internationally and at home—Austin City Limits.

By [Michael Stone](#) [Email the author](#) October 26, 2012

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Editor's Note: West Cobb Patch Editor Michael Stone traveled to Texas to see the biggest names in live music perform at [Austin City Limits](#). Photographer Fletcher Pickering captured the event in pictures.

The Thursday night streets of Austin, Texas are lifting the bar high for the three-day musical jubilee that's to follow. Floods of locals and temporaries are roaming on foot or by pedicab to the next thing that smells yummy, looks pretty or sounds enticing.

In one particular joint, on the city's renowned, nightlife-driven Sixth Street, local favorite Swamp Sauce is grooving behind a freewheeling, harmonica-playing frontman. Despite being together for a few years and playing countless dozens of gigs, all four members exude sweat, precision and passion for their blues originals and covers for the entirety of a three-hour set. Freewheeler shouts to the congregation, "How many of y'all are here for Austin City Limits?" The question is worth the majority raising their glasses.

It's an early set, wrapping up at 10. That's a ticket for many of the out-of-towners to scurry back to their places of sleep and rest up for an iconic name—if not *the* most—that rock 'n' roll has to offer.

"Basically we had a goal about a year ago," [Quiet Corral](#) drummer and producer Jim Barnes tells Patch following their Friday show at Austin City Limits. "If we can play ACL within a year, that'll be the best that we can possibly do."

Since the young indie-folk band has only been around for two years and won't release their debut album 'til early 2013, guitarist and vocalist Garrett Childers used words like "blessed," "lucky" and "surreal" to describe being on a bill with Neil Young, Jack White, the Black Keys and the Red Hot Chili Peppers. They've had plenty of smaller gigs, but nothing like this.

"Obviously, it's a dream come true," Childers conveys, sounding as animated as we all once did on Christmas. "That's really cliché sounding, but it is."

In the most simple of words, Austin City Limits is live music. The name to most of the U.S. is at least recognizable. But is it a band? A concert hall? A TV

show? A music festival? (If you picked C and D, class, you get a star for the day.)

Thinking of it at the rudimentary level of go-and-see-some-bands is still enjoyable. But bringing in the depth makes even the fans feel “blessed” and “lucky” just to be here. Leading off with Willie Nelson in 1974, the show continues to be broadcast on PBS channels nationwide. It’s put on by the network’s Austin station, KLRU, and features just live music before a crowd of under 1,000. [The many notable performances](#) include Roy Orbison, Stevie Ray Vaughn, Neil Young and Ray Charles. The entire list of small, big and very big acts helped Austin earn the title of the “Live Music Capital of the World.”

Eventually, in 2002, the show’s roots expanded to a two-day shindig in the city’s Zilker Park, drawing in more than 42,000. Another day was tacked on in 2003, and in 2013, for the 12th annual, the music will be spread over two entire weekends.

At this year’s eight-stage event, two weekends are easily possible, as the hoards of fans, equipped with constant smiles, have to repeatedly decide between two mainstream staples: Weezer or Florence and the Machine, Jack White or Neil Young, the Avett Brothers or Iggy and the Stooges, AVICII or the Black Keys.

Earlier in the day, when the lesser-known folks play, as many as six stages are going at the same time. The band total of 132 has treasures up and down, says Austin inhabitant Ellen Elmore as she rests after Neil Young. Though many of her city-mates are scared of the mass and claim, “I’m not going anywhere near it,” Elmore goes “all day every day.”

“In the four times I’ve come,” the 40-something explains, “I’ve seen it’s got bigger acts for the headliners at the end of the night. But there’s still a lot of great bands all during the day that you might not’ve heard of.”

All during the day stretches as early as 11:15—a tough time to be fully functional on a weekend in a sleepless, chirpy city like Austin. But with ticket pricetags of a couple hundred, some are up an’ at ‘em and ready to pace their energy for the full ACL.

Speaking on her early Saturday performance, electronic-infused rapper [Dev](#) of *Beat Down Low* and *Booty Bounce* fame says, “The turnout this morning was great. It was very warm, but a lot of kids showed up.”

Sliding into midday, a smaller-but-spirited crowd has gathered for Nashville favorite [Space Capone](#), a disco-influenced, funky, danceable crew ([YouTube “I Just Wanna Dance”](#) and you’re hooked). “Kids come to festivals expecting to be turned on to somebody they haven’t heard before,” frontman Aaron Winters, dressed in trademark vest and tie, explains backstage at the foot of the stage steps before going on. “There’s somewhat of a cool factor if you’re on a festival bill.”

Winters and his interchangeable bandmates have also tackled the likes of Bonnaroo, [Hangout Fest](#), CMJ Music Marathon and another Austin favorite, South by Southwest. In the digital age, where access to free music takes less than five clicks, making yourself viable on the festival circuit is the aim of anyone wanting their passion to turn career, he explains. “We’re fed by our live shows and not our records.”

Oddly, Austin City Limits isn’t ranked on what appears to be the online realm’s [only credible international list](#) of biggest music festivals, which, for the U.S., only includes California’s Coachella and Tennessee’s Bonnaroo. (Guess CNBC accidentally missed ACL because its estimated daily draw of 75,000 should put it at No. 9.) An average of 175,000 daily puts England’s Glastonbury Festival at No. 1.

U.K. folk band [Dry the River](#) has played Glastonbury and others across Europe, giving singer Peter Liddle and bassist Scott Miller perspective on the contrasts with the U.S.

“The main difference is people want to listen to music in the U.S., whereas in the U.K., generally, they’re at the festival just to get wasted,” they say after their ACL gig, both throwing in on the sentence. “People just want to drink—they get trashed.”

Here, there’s “grand vibes” and a “genuine curiosity for new music,” Liddle says.

As he waits mid-crowd for Alabama Shakes’ jam at his third ACL, Michael Wren of New Orleans puts the blame on fewer vacations for our cross-Atlantic friends.

“People’s standard of living is good, but they don’t go on vacations like Americans go on vacations,” relates the 25-year-old, who has been to Rock Werchter in Belgium and Summercase in Spain. Only getting time off every six months or so, Europeans are there “more to socialize and drink,” he says.

Especially in Italy, there’s a lack of musical appreciation, Rino Iacovella says in a heavy accent as he takes a break backstage in between shows. The 43-year-old Italian has been to four ACLs and ten South by Southwest to photograph for he and his friends’ online music magazine, [Cheapo](#). “In Italy, the culture of music (does) not exist. Just maybe pop music.”

One Italian artist, rapper Jovanotti, infiltrated this year’s ACL lineup, but Iacovella isn’t sure if his countrymen at the show are permanent transplants or here just for the fest. “Under the stage, I saw a lot of Italian fans, but I don’t know. Is it just tourists (who) stay here in U.S.A.? Or maybe fans come from Italy because (they) want to see Jovanotti?”

The U.S.-to-U.S. comparison is easy for those who have been to just a few or an abundance. Festivals in the heart of cities like ACL and Atlanta’s comparable version, [Music Midtown](#), don’t attract too much scanty, colorful, out-there dress. In the woods, though, [like Counterpoint outside Atlanta a few weeks ago](#), anything—and nothing—is fair game.

[Deep Dark Woods](#) guitarist Burke Barlow grabbed an instant difference from ACL and Bonnaroo, which his band has also played. “My first impression

is there's more shade" at ACL, he laughs soon after arriving in Austin.

Flags, whether they represent a country, college or band, seem to be ACL's trademark. With the ground, chairs or backpacks serving as flagpoles, they're speckled throughout the endless sea of bodies. One particular risqué flag offers a lesson on crowd advancement during a headliner: Two PVC pipes at a right angle with six lovely brassieres dangling gets the boys ogling and girlfriends disgusted long enough to grab a couple feet at a time. (Trailing a group of ladies with such a strategy makes for a fun game during a headlining band you don't too much care for.)

Meanwhile, way ahead of this crowd-squeezing scam, the raw rock sounds of the Black Keys are being laid out on stage before what looks like a never-ending blanket of bobbing heads, each one adding to the rush the band must be feeling. There's no question that being privileged enough to present one's musical and lyrical soul to so many is a "surreal" feeling, reserved for the select few who are "lucky" and "blessed" enough to be members of rock's elite club—those who have played Austin City Limits.

"As soon as you go on stage, you're in the zone, or you should be in the zone if you're doing anything right," Space Capone's Winters describes. "You're in your own element—no one can touch you. It's a really special, ethereal place to be, and I would assume it's the reason a lot of us do what we do."

On a side note: If you're ever in Austin, and a pedicab driver recommends grabbing fish tacos from a place called Turf 'N' Surf Po' Boys, accept their guidance. Don't be cynical about the biased advice because pedicab drivers get food discounts there. Don't be scared because the restaurant is basically an RV in a parking lot. Food, to die twice for. Price, your wallet won't lose much weight. Customer service, well, if the wind smacks you and takes your shrimp parmesan to the ground, they might be kind enough to cook you up another.

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