Stevie Ray Vaughan Podcast | Episode 3

Hippies, Weirdos, and the Austin Scene that Revitalized the Blues

[Guitar rift from *Pride and Joy* by Stevie Ray Vaughan]

Evan Windham: Hi, I'm Evan Windham from the Bullock Texas State History Museum in Austin. Welcome to the third episode in our podcast, a recount of my journey of discovery into the history of the legendary Texas guitarist Stevie Ray Vaughan. In this episode, we'll flash back to the early 70s and explore how Austin's reputation as a place where outsiders could congregate freely inspired musicians who were interested in historic music styles like the blues, to get together and build a scene around their shared interests.

And we'll get to know one of the most important characters at the center of Austin's vibrant music scene, a certain Clifford Antone, who single-handedly created what might be considered the era's premier blues academy, where aspiring young musicians could play with, learn from, and befriend an older generation of blues legends. We're glad you've joined us.

♪ …won't never grow old. She's my sweet little thing, she's my pride and joy. She's my sweet little baby, I'm her little lover boy. ♪

By this point, I'd come to a solid understanding of how Double Trouble had come together as a band and why Texas had birthed a unique form of the blues. Now, I wanted to get a sense of what it was like to live and ply a trade as a musician in the Austin of the early 70s. So, I talked with a bunch of people who were there when it all went down, and a few who are carrying the torch today, keeping the blues and the spirit of Clifford Antone alive and well.

[cheering]

In the 60s and 70s, Austin was known for having a vibe closely associated with the West Coast. Stevie Ray's older brother, Jimmie Vaughan, had lived in California for a spell, and so he took notice of a decidedly liberal culture developing down in Central Texas.

Jimmie Vaughan: You know, back then, Austin was considered sort of the San Francisco of Texas. There was a lot of beatniks and weirdos here. It had a reputation for being a little bit crazy, a little over the edge.

Windham: Jimmie's band, The Fabulous Thunderbirds, would soon become a mainstay on the Austin club circuit, and Texas writer Joe Nick Patoski remembered Austin as a place tolerant of folks who deviated from the social norms of the period.

Joe Nick Patoski: Austin was a free space to anyone who was different. That's historic. There were small little scenes in Houston and Dallas, but really the only place you could be a hippie was Austin. It was the only place that you could have long hair and be different, not get beat up for being different. When I moved back to Texas in 1973, there wasn't much going on in

Fort Worth, and I knew I was attuned enough to music that I sensed a scene in the making in Austin, and I wanted to write about music.

Windham: Joe Nick had spotted Austin as a place where he could experience and write about many different forms of music, and Austin's growing blues scene wasn't the only thing sprouting in fertile soil. A uniquely Texas variety of country music was also springing up. The so-called Cosmic Cowboys, led by Willie Nelson, Jerry Jeff Walker, and others, were thumbing their nose at the Nashville-dominated country music industry.

♪ Whiskey River, take my mind. Don't let her memory torture me. Whiskey River don't run dry. You're all I got, take care of me. ♪

Patoski: The first time I saw Willie Nelson play was on a flatbed trailer at a car lot. Showing off the 1974 Fords at McMorris Ford. Willie, who was playing there and showing off the cars. It was mind blowing. It was a revealing experience because it was a traditional country band, but they went off and jammed and played this really extended, improvised music like the Allman Brothers and the Grateful Dead, who I'd seen before. And it's like, what is going on here?

[blues rift playing]

Windham: Willie and friends were creating a free-wheeling mashup of country, folk, and rock music. A pattern of rebellion and musical liberalism that would be adopted by Stevie Ray and his blues colleagues. In 1969, Jimmie Vaughan looked around and spotted Austin as a place where his dream of building a blues scene might be possible.

Vaughan: I came down here and I would see, they had a lot of weird bands like the Conqueroo, and they had Thirteenth Floor Elevators, and they had all these kind of bands like that. So, I thought, well, if they'll let them do that then they'll let me have a bluesman, you know. So, you know, [I] played for years around town, really sort of got the blues scene going.

Windham: Joe Nick impressed upon me that no matter what your scene was, you had people to hang out with, especially if you were into outdated or exotic musical styles.

Patoski: The rest of the world was getting into disco, and Austin was going back to the 40s and 50s. That's Asleep at the Wheel and Alvin Crow and bands like that were mining this old stuff, just like a lot of blues bands were going back in time. And the Thunderbirds were wonderful archeologists and doing that because they'd dug up some real weird, rare sounds and covered them.

It might have only been five or 10 of you here in Austin, but if there was a music that was worthy of a tribe, you had a tribe in Austin. I remember seeing, you know, Mods wearing trench coats, riding Vespas, listening to Ska music. There was a whole scene there. You could fall on these self-contained worlds.

Windham: So, I'd gotten a good sense that Austin provided a place for like-minded people to congregate and be creative together. But if you're a band, you also need a place to play. So, I

asked about the blues club scene at the time, and Joe Nick regaled me with anecdotes about different spots, each with its own quirks and unique vibe.

Patoski: Austin in the early 70s, there was certainly the Armadillo World Headquarters, which was that was the concert hall and the institution, but all these smaller clubs. There was a place on Eighth and Red River that I started frequenting called the One Night and it was a coffin shaped entrance, and you would walk in and it just smelled of Lysol and vomit and, and old beer, and they had all these old, like, plumbing fixtures and just stuff up on the ceiling, bicycles, sinks. And the music was basically white boy blues bands. And there were a lot of them in Austin at the time. And in fact, Soap Creek is where I first heard Stevie Vaughan play with a band called Paul Ray and His Cobras.

♪ You know, now I'm trying to find my baby. I want somebody to send her home to me. ♪

Patoski: Paul Ray and The Cobras had Tuesday night, at Soda Creek Saloon, which was tequila night. Twenty-five cents for a shot of tequila. Crowds went wild. And Paul Ray had a great voice, came from Dallas, friend of Jimmie Vaughan's. That's where I first saw Clifton Chenier. That's where Delbert McClinton first played. That's where Joe Ely first played, this is where a lot of these really, you know, stellar Texas acts first got their chops.

[blues music playing]

Windham: It was hilarious hearing about the funky old Austin clubs that were booking blues bands back in the day. But the story that stood out for me was the one that I discovered had risen above the rest in terms of its impact on multiple generations of musicians and music lovers.

I'm talking about the granddaddy of them all, the club that will forever be enshrined not only as a great live music venue, but as a house of hero worship. And during a pivotal moment in the mid 70s, as a unique training ground for new generation of blues players. I'm talking, of course, about Antone's, Austin's self-proclaimed home of the blues.

[blues music playing]

Clifford Anton was born in 1949 and raised in Port Arthur. He moved to Austin in 1968 to attend the University of Texas. At school, he discovered the uniquely American musical genre that would change the course of his life forever. In a 1977 interview, Clifford said, "When I finally heard the Chicago blues man—it was like I'd finally discovered he'd had been in my mind my whole life."

But his college stint didn't last long. He dropped out and agreed to run a sandwich shop owned by his parents.

Patoski: But in 1975, the game changed again when this guy from Port Arthur, who had been trying to run his parent's import food business near the Capitol and just he wasn't into it. You go into Antone's Imports looking for a deli sandwich, and there'd never be anyone up front.

You have to go in the back, and there would be Clifford Antone playing his guitar or bass, along with some kind of blues music on the stereo. Clifford Antone's parents finally figured out their son was not the guy to be running their business. You know, they were hoping he would be a productive citizen and maybe a businessperson.

So, they did not resist and helped him open his blues club on Sixth and Brazos in an old furniture store, in 1975.

Windham: Austin had no idea what was about to happen, including the musicians like Stevie Ray, who were already here and trying to kickstart a blues scene. Clifford intended his new club as a platform for hearing a largely forgotten music played by the remaining masters of the form.

He recognized the importance of hosting these pioneers from early generations before they passed away, and all that remained were rare recordings and faded memories. And he had a plan for doing this in a style that distinguished itself from the hippie-infused tone that pervaded many other local clubs.

Patoski: Clifford said, we're not the Armadillo. We're not just tie-dye shirts and bellbottoms and long hair. We're going to dress nice. We're going play real blues. And sure enough, Clifford brought in, you know, the giants of blues music. Here comes Muddy Waters, you know, here comes Howlin' Wolf's old band, here comes Jimmy Reed, here comes Bobby "Blue" Bland. That's anybody that's alive and is recognized as a blues artist, started beating a path to Antone's.

[blues music playing]

Windham: My first thought after talking with Joe Nick was, how did a young kid like Clifford Antone convince these blues legends from Chicago, the West Coast, and elsewhere to come play his little club down in Austin? Texas State University professor Dr. Gary Hartman has talked extensively with Clifford and many of the old blues masters, so I asked him how these guys were coaxed out of virtual retirement.

Dr. Gary Hartman: He picked up the phone and just started calling these blues legends, and he thought, they'll probably hang up on me, but I'm going to ask them if they would consider coming down to Austin and playing in this new club I've opened. And much to his surprise, they said, "Yeah man, we'd love to come play."

And so, they start coming down here. And it's exciting for them because by then many of these blues pioneers are in their 70s or 80s, and no one has really shown much interest in them in, you know, 10, 20, 30 years. And they said, we just couldn't believe that this group of young, white college students wanted us to come play. And they also couldn't believe that Clifford Antone knew everything about them. They said, "We didn't think anybody knew who we were anymore."

Windham: I could understand how these older musicians were interested to keep playing if someone would give them a stage to perform on. Joe Nick offered another reason why they not only agreed to come to Austin in the first place but kept coming back.

Patoski: They heard that Clifford not only treated his bands well, but he paid them in full. And you know, these blues guys are used to getting cheated and ripped off. And so, Clifford had all these great acts come in.

Windham: Clifford was achieving his dream, but he realized it wasn't just about bringing in blues forefathers to play for white college kids. Clifford instinctively found ways to foster interpersonal relationships between the elders and the younger generation, and it resulted in a community where everyone mixed and mingled as friends and colleagues.

He hired local bands such as Jimmie Vaughan's the Fabulous Thunderbirds to open for the headliners. And he booked the main acts for multi-week stints, during which they could hold court and get comfortable while not having to worry about getting to the next town or the next gig. Here's Joe Nick.

Patoski: Clifford would bring in these established acts, especially from Chicago, and he would keep people around that came in the bands. Hubert Sumlin, Howlin Wolf's guitarist, he came with the Wolfgang, they came down, and Clifford just keep Hubert around for two or three weeks. He just, you know, it pays whatever it cost to keep them there and have him hang. And through hanging, you know, people like Jimmie and Denny and Stevie could hang around these guys. It's not like watching them play, but it's like talking to them, knowing them as people. Antone's was really this great exposure medium.

And that was basically school. And this was a school that just only existed for a few years, and it didn't exist before it, and it doesn't exist now. So it was that kind of environment that Stevie was in. And I think really, you know, he got to start absorbing things.

Windham: From a number of people I heard a particular story that exemplified for me how Antone's served to connect mentors and students. Jimmie Vaughan was in the club the night that Clifford, against many odds, fatefully connected Stevie Ray with one of the literal and figurative giants of the blues.

[cars on the road]

Vaughan: Here we are at Antone's. I don't know what year it was, and we're all standing around this Albert King show. It's packed. It's like Saturday night. If you ever saw Albert King play, he's like Goliath with the guitar. He's the meanest, baddest guitar player you've ever heard of. Clifford Antone says, hey, I have this kid that I want you to let sit in and play with you.

[speaking over guitar]

Albert King: "Wait a minute. You know, I often think about the time. You would come in dragging your little guitar and say, I want to sit in. And I'd say—Stephen? Sure. Let him sit."

Vaughan: Albert King's got 10 hits. I mean, he's hot. Albert just kind of looks at Clifford like you're crazy.

King: "Who is Stevie? Right. Yeah. Bring him on up, let him sit in."

Vaughan: He was a little offended, and he said, okay, bring him up. I think he was going to do a number on him. Stevie plugged in and, you know, and started playing Albert King licks and doing 'em really good. So, Albert just sort of went, "Okay." And he just sort of took him under his wing.

King: "Yeah, it was a good time."

Vaughan: But I wouldn't have dared gotten up there. I don't think anybody in the room would have got up there. You don't go and ask Albert King, "Can I sit in?" It's crazy. He didn't like anybody else. But he liked Stevie.

[blues music playing]

Windham: I couldn't stop thinking about that story. I mean, how many of us in this world ever get the chance of a lifetime to match up with a mentor that you've idolized? And then make the most of it. From the start Clifford intended Antone's as a place for local musicians to commune and form a sense of camaraderie, and it cut both ways.

The local players could listen to and learn from their heroes. The veterans got to pass on knowledge, skills and experience that might otherwise have been lost. Dr. Hartman put it into context for me.

Dr. Hartman: Then when you get guys like Stevie Vaughan and Jimmie Vaughan who actually worship these older Black blues players, but they have learned to play as well or better, and they get up on stage and start jamming with these older Black blues pioneers.

Then the older Black guys are truly blown away. I mean, they can't believe that they're being revered and emulated and shown so much respect. That was really when these young white people started coming together literally on stage with these older blues pioneers. I think that's really when this sort of revival of blues, certainly in Texas, happened.

Windham: Clifford's intention behind his club is alive and well today. I talked with Will Bridges and Zach Ernst, two of the main forces behind Antone's current manifestation. They voice a dedication to and deep passion for maintaining Clifford's original vision. Here's Will.

Will Bridges: When Zach would book some of the classic Antone's artists to come back, and we were so glad to get them back and hoping they would like the new club. They would call us back before we had the courage to call them back. "Hey, you know, I got another idea for a

show.” And after a while we were like, wait a second, this is incredible. They're not just doing this to be nice. They actually like playing here.

Windham: Much of my journey through this bit of history frequently ended with a mild letdown, when I considered that some beautiful moment in time was lost along with the clubs and many of the musicians that built and sustained the scene. But Will explained that Antone's is thankfully a different story.

Bridges: Clubs come and go. I use the analogy, it's like trees in the forest, you know, they grow, some grow older than others. It's sad when you see one go. You try and keep it around as long as you can. So, it's kind of it's a cyclical thing. They come and they go.

Most clubs, in fact, with very few exceptions, have had one iteration, but Antone's has had six. It's like they didn't get the memo that, hey, you're supposed to just call it quits. And so, because of that, it represents so much more than just its four walls and a stage. It literally is that flickering flame that represents the resilience and future and viability of the Austin music economy. And so, there are a lot of people, including us, that say, as long as Antone’s is still going, we're going to be all right.

♪ Well I'm lovestruck, baby, I must confess. Life without you darlin' is a solid mess. Thinkin' 'bout you baby. ♪

Windham: if there's anything I've learned about what it means to build and sustain a music scene of any type, it's the necessity for maintaining authenticity and a dedication to increasing the potential for artistic discovery. In that historic moment, a group of folks: blues elders, musicians like Stevie Ray Vaughan, club owners such as Clifford Antone, and the crowds that came to listen, banded together, motivated by the spirit of the age and revitalized a historic musical style and passed a torch to a new generation that would continue singing and playing the blues.

During this project, I went out to clubs like Antone’s, The Continental Club, and C Boys, to name a few. And these venues overflow with history and passion and a sense of community in the most welcoming way I can possibly describe. In these places you can still see and hear multiple generations of blues musicians playing the music they love, for the people who love it.

And the fertile ground of Austin in the 1970s spawned so many lasting and memorable musical moments. Stevie Ray Vaughan and Double Trouble were only one. But it's their story we're telling here, so tune in next time when we follow the band's trajectory from local heroes to worldwide recognition to iconic masters of the genre. Enshrined alongside the mentors from whom they learned their craft.

The exhibition *Pride and Joy: The Texas Blues of Stevie Ray Vaughan* was created by the Grammy Museum in Los Angeles and guest curated by Texas blues legend and Stevie Ray's brother, Jimmie Vaughan. The show runs at the Bullock Museum through July 23, 2017.

This podcast is a production of the Bullock Texas State History Museum. Learn more at TheStoryofTexas.com.

♪ Your kisses trip me up and they're just doggone sweet. Don’t you know baby you can't be beat. I'm a lovestruck baby. Yeah, I'm a lovestruck baby. You got me lovestruck baby. ♪

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