

Austin Area Festivals: Music and More

What do music, chili peppers, bamboo, wine, watermelon, ice cream and Eeyore the donkey from Winnie the Pooh have in common?

They all have festivals devoted to them in Austin or nearby towns. In fact, there are so many festivals of all kinds in the Austin area that it is difficult to keep track of them. The Austin American-Statesman apparently gave up trying to keep count back in 2004, judging by a recent visit to the festivals page on their current website a quick count there reveals there were more than 50 festivals in existence then, and the compilers of the list noted that those were just some of the festivals.

Other festivals have appeared since then. The first-ever Pachanga Latino Music Festival, for instance, was held on May 31st of this year. The second annual Ice Cream Festival will take place on August 9.

Of course, everyone knows about the Austin City Limits Music Festival and the South by Southwest Conferences and Festivals. Those events feature what Austin has become known for around the world; great live music. Tens of thousands of music lovers flock to these events to see the international, national and regional acts that they showcase. These events bring in huge amounts of money to the Austin economy. In fact, SXSW is Austin's highest money-making public event, as reported by Wikipedia.

There are many more music festivals in the Austin area as well. The Old Settler's Reunion in nearby Driftwood, Texas attracts some of the premier national bluegrass and Americana acts, as well as many of the best regional Texas music groups and songwriters. This festival happens every April and attracts thousands of music fans to the beautiful grounds at the Salt Lick Pavilion and Camp Ben McCulloch.

The Reggae Festival, also in April, and the Austin Celtic Festival in November are just two more of the events held in Austin that feature music as their main raison d'etre. Of course, many other festivals include music in their programs as well. Some of these include Viva Cinco de Mayo in late April/early May, the Austin Fine Arts Festival, at the beginning of April, and the Old Pecan Street Fall Arts Festival in late September.

This latter event began more than 30 years ago to provide family friendly, free admission venue to collect arts and crafts from local and national artists and artisans, experience live music, theater plays, comedy, magic, poetry, film, parades, and take part of a long standing Austin tradition. More than 300,000 people attend this event every year, and festival promoters estimate it generates more than \$43 million for the local economy.

Another long-standing, grass-roots festival is Eeyore's Birthday Party which occurs every year in late April at Pease Park. According to Austin American-Statesman writer Anita Powell. The party has grown considerably since its inception in 1963 by a group of University of Texas students. The free-spirited celebration usually features Maypole dancing, costume contests, a hippie queen pageant, food, birthday cake and entertainment by local bands. This festival, perhaps more than any other, reflects the spirit that Austin is famous (or infamous) for and that inspired the unofficial slogan for the city: "keep Austin weird".

What about bamboo, wine, watermelon and chili peppers? The Bamboo Festival is presented at Zilker Botanical Gardens in late August every year and features "all things bamboo". There are at least two important wine festivals in the area: the Texas Hill Country Wine and Food Festival in early April and the Austin Wine Festival in late May. The Chili Pepper Fiesta is held in the town of Elgin, just east of Austin, on the second Saturday in September. The Luling Watermelon Thump in June garners national attention every year with its watermelon seed spitting contest.

All these festivals reflect what the city of Austin has been about through most of its history. It fosters and encourages creativity, diversity, freedom of expression and the celebration of the hard work and enterprise of its citizens.

About the Author

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