

HARD ROCK AND ROAD

Terror in Texas

"Hey, darlin', you *got* to get your ass *down* here." It was my buddy Liz, the dyke with the drawl I *cain't* resist. And hell, yes, it drew me—like the scent of a rebel boy's armpit—into a cultural combat zone. The event was innocuously named The Second Annual South by Southwest Music and Media Conference. The place was Austin, Texas.

In the deceptive calm of blue evenings punctuated by the sounds of crickets, 200 bands would line up at 18 venues, each cranking out a 20-minute set, each desperately hoping to catch the ear of a major label's A and R rep. Three nights of that havoc and heartbreak were to be interrupted only by the Austin Music Awards, a modest affair that threatened to eat Friday night whole. I took a fairly Texan approach to the proceedings, aiming to stay respectably ripped, disheveled, and delighted for the duration. I was there to have fun—maybe even get laid—and leave the suffering to the musicians.

Fun was plentiful, but there seemed to be a serious shortage of homos. Eight years back, there were at least a half-dozen rowdy queers in local punk bands, and the industry is thick with us, but when notorious New York gay blade Jim Fouratt and I undertook a rigorous investigation at this event, the only fellow homos we unearthed were a deejay-reviewer from Dallas and a flamboyant volunteer, who offered me a cassette for a proposed musical that sounded like old Blondie outtakes. Fouratt and I concurred on the dearth of homos, and *he* insists that people are gay until proven otherwise.

Lesbians, on the other hand, seemed to be on a roll in Austin. In fact, two of the bands to catch were the creations of no-nonsense dykes. As it happened, the Sapphic trio **Two Nice Girls** played on the opening night (Thursday), while the two-girl, one-boy combo **Child Bearing Hips** was slated for the closing slot (Sunday night) at the same club. Stamina willing, I vowed I'd catch them both.

The club, Liberty Lunch, looked a lot like a firebombed warehouse, but a squad of fans sat reverently on the stained floor circling the stage, awaiting **Two Nice Girls**. The trio seemed tense if impressive; their



Looking sexy, sounding good: muscular riffs from guitarist Will Sexton

Roches-via-Joan Armatrading arrangements were crowded into a swift set. They concluded with an ornate cover of "Sweet Jane" but, sadly, omitted their local fave, "Birth Control," in which Gretchen gamely laments, "I just spent my last \$10 on birth control and beer/Life was so much easier when I was sober and queer."

Nevertheless, Fouratt, their manager, shook his head at the set's closing and ominously declared, "Now we'll see about A and R homophobia." I squinted at him uncomprehendingly. "All those songs were about *girls*," he added with a hint of exasperation.

I hadn't really noticed, but then, I thought the group being shamelessly gay was terrific. I hadn't heard any references to bumping pussy. I was thinking they ought to have done covers of "To All the Girls I've Loved Before" and "We're an American Band"—and made a splash!

Glass Eye, my favorite Austin combo, was on next. The group laid down stuttering rhythms (out of the **Gang of Four**) against lush, keening harmonies: sort of postindustrial funk folkies. Again the set was way too short, and I wished they had

done a cover of "Luka." But I applauded the title of their upcoming LP, *Bent by Nature*.

Liz and I stayed up till dawn that night, decimating a bottle of Wild Turkey, reading poetry aloud, and exchanging war stories. After a salutary 12-hour coma, I went shuffling into the swelter of the endless awards show. **Timbuk Three** turned in the standout set of the night, buoyantly seducing the crowd. I can't think of another married duo that has made such quirky, engaging music. Playing tunes from their upcoming LP, *Eden Alley*, the twosome and their beat box were joined by a fiddler and a squeeze-box player for a couple of numbers. The dancing and celebration were infectious.

At the lobby bar, while dodging psychotic cowboys, I ran into my friend Draper. The ragged straight stud had just finished his first novel and was ranting refreshingly to me about the acid he'd taken for a pickup basketball game the night before. He kindly filled me in on the statewide high school basketball championship game that was scheduled for the next day. "This league is only for the *small* towns. No city boys. It's *sociology*," he enthused.

I thought it sounded sexy, but I just said, "Superb." The game would start at 9 a.m.

The awards show's finale was gripping, but as **Ronnie Lane** (radiant and crippled with MS) crowed with tender glory over the **True Believers** and guest guitarist **Richard Lloyd**, Draper and I exchanged the glances of the damned. It was 5 a.m. We knew we'd never make sociology. Draper would drift off to visions of flawless cheerleaders, I to slam-dunking seniors.

I was ambulatory by 1 p.m., though, and happy. Seventeen-year-old **Will Sexton**, the 6-foot 3-inch guitarist with unearthly cheekbones and a Matt Dillon smile, was ripping out muscular riffs from a small stage in the parking lot of a local record store. This was more delinquent than basketball and brought a grin to my parched lips. Will looked sexy. He sounded good. Not so good that I would buy his debut album, but damn, I wished that he had played *my* high school graduation.

At the set's end, a woman named Ruby won the drawing for Will's guitar. Hoisting her 5-year-old onstage, she bellowed, "It's for *him*." As Will inscribed the ax for **Bobby Reno**, shirtless teens rocked in small circles on their skateboards while frat boys with dangerous eyebrows and in tank tops chugged beer and glistened on the tailgates of parked pickups. My kind of scenery.

That night I ricocheted through club land. At the blues club Antone's, I caught gnarled outlaw songwriter **Billy Joe Shaver** (who lost the fingers of his right hand in a sawmill accident before he took up the guitar) laying down a veteran's set—with his son on lead guitar. With lethal assurance, Billy Joe froze time with his controversial hit from 15 years ago, "Black Rose" (about falling for a Negress), boasting, "The devil made me do it the first time/The second time I did it on my own." What homo couldn't sympathize?

Down the street, at Dirty Sally's, two male strippers in posing straps and cowboy boots were butt-flexing for dollar bills while a group that calls itself **The Condom Fairies** passed through, dispensing rubbers. Across town, at Snuffy's, the C&W queer bar, I hit the "Gone with the Wind Ball," where boys in polo shirts watched mustachioed midget Rhett's being swept through high-steppin' waltzes and Texas two-steps by hulks in hoopskirts. I'd seen that stuff done better in San Francisco and Seattle, but you don't go telling that to a Texan.

With fatigue as my copilot, I tore on up to Big Mamou—a glorious outhouse of a

club, where Wayne Toups (the current zydeco king, to Cajun music connoisseurs) was blistering paint with an accordion solo, only to be followed by Charles Simian, the Mick Jagger of zydeco, whose band landed a cut on the soundtrack of *The Big Easy*. As they roared into a crude, carnal roadhouse revival, white boys with Mohawks began dancing bowleggedly and sweating kerosene. An A and R man smiled sagely as visions of remixes danced in his head. This dog left, howling at the moon.

Sunday, I let my dick navigate and headed to the venerable disco that locals call The Butthouse (tourists: The Boat-house). Austin's rock-and-roll queer bars are history; the days of ecstasy bashes at the traveling Club Iguana are only faint, fond memories. A keg of free beer is the lure here, and—oh, yeah—guys like this green-eyed gymnast from a tumbleweed town, with a West Texas accent so thick, you could sit on it. As Tim's lips grazed mine (to the inescapable strains of the Pet Shop Boys' tribute to Elvis 'n' Willie, "Always on My Mind"), I felt Elvis's spirit stirring in my 50ls.

En route to Tim's digs, I asked him to stop for a skosh. I needed to duck into Liberty Lunch and check out **Child Bearing Hips**. I found the statuesque, silver-streaked lead singer, Ann Powell, braying: It was Miss Kitty doing Janis Joplin—all brass and tack. Did in my boner instantly. During an acoustic duet with Pam, the raven-haired drummer, I thought the latter must be the group's *real* talent; but unfortunately, the trio hadn't figured that out. Convinced that I had done my duty, I sauntered back to Tim's car, thinking of all the musicians who would be bitching the next day that they didn't get the attention, awards, press, or contracts that they deserved. I could hear Ann Powell growling, "Six minutes with some homo who loses his boner, and he writes off my whole career."

All that outrage was dwarfed by the sky, hungry with stars—and the profound intuition that I was careening toward one of the conference's most breathtaking performances. A gospel station muttered on the radio. I took a soft swallow from a flask of bourbon and chuckled with sheer delight.

Tim glanced over and asked, "Happy to be here?" as his eyes trailed down my left arm to my fingers, which were lazily dusting his responsive crotch.

"Better than happy," I grinned. "I'm unspeakably grateful."

Tim set his eyes on the horizon and, smiling, drove.

—Adam Block