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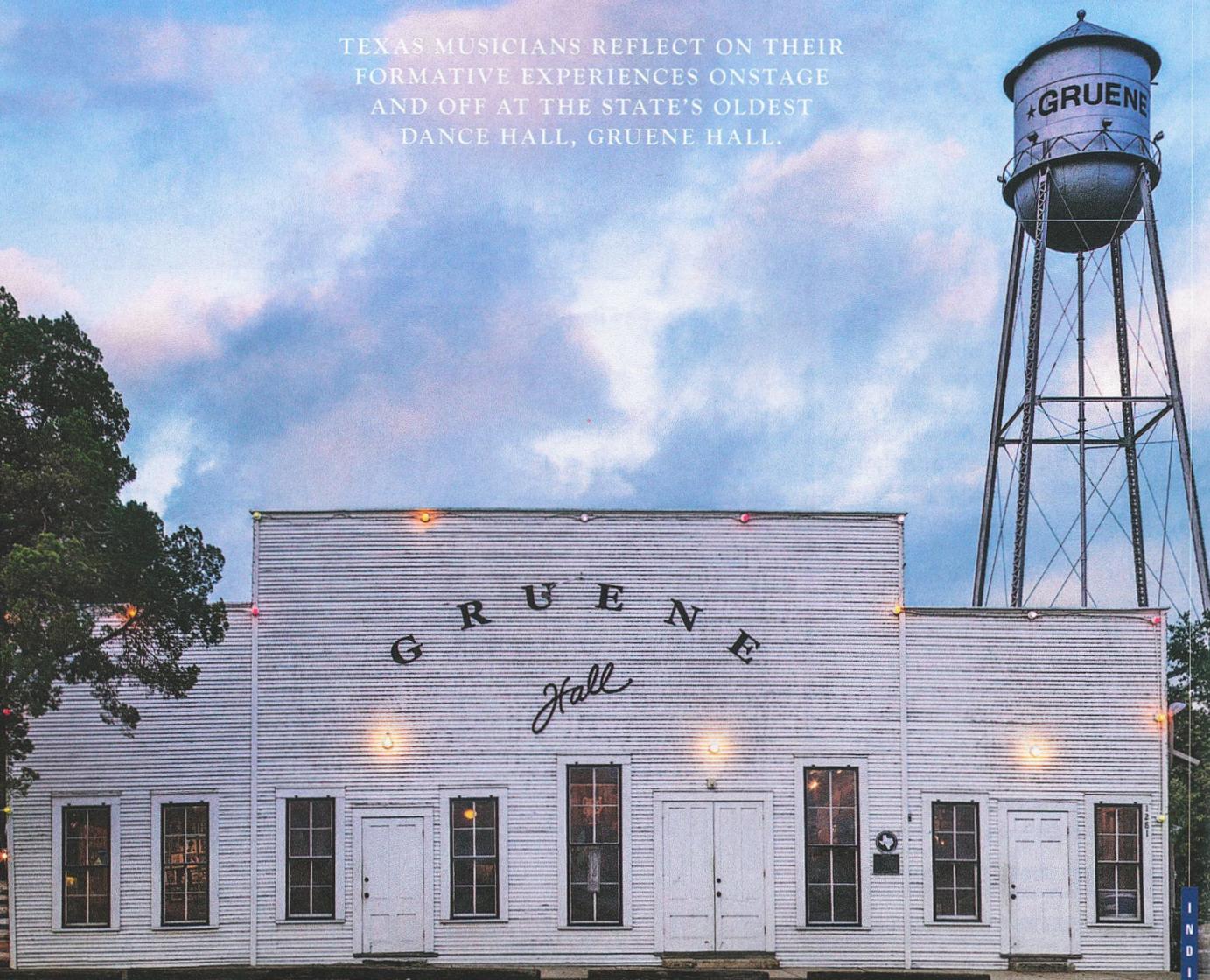
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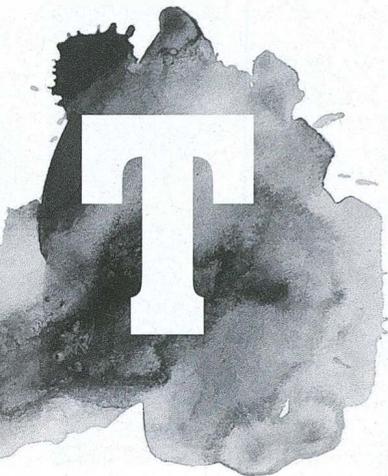
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Honky-Tonk Heroes

TEXAS MUSICIANS REFLECT ON THEIR
FORMATIVE EXPERIENCES ONSTAGE
AND OFF AT THE STATE'S OLDEST
DANCE HALL, GRUENE HALL.



By Noah W. Bailey



HERE ARE CERTAIN PILGRIMAGES ALL Texans must make to maintain their bonafides. A road trip to the mountains of Big Bend. A few days soaking up the sun on the Gulf Coast. Or an afternoon spent floating in the cool, lazy waters of a Hill Country river. But for Texas roots musicians and their fans, the holiest spot in Texas sits in New Braunfels on a bluff overlooking the Guadalupe River just a few miles west of Interstate 35, in a glorified barn built in 1878 by a German immigrant named Henry D. Gruene.

Gruene (pronounced “green”) Hall is best known as the oldest dance hall in Texas—or “the oldest continually operating dance hall in Texas” if you’re a lawyer. Every year, thousands of Texans make the trip for a show at the storied venue, drawn by the poetry of neon, cheap beer, and chicken-wire windows.

Though it operated for almost 100 years as a traditional German dance hall—hosting square dances, polka bands, and the occasional honky-tonk act—Gruene Hall’s reputation truly caught fire a mere four decades ago, when an enterprising college dropout named Pat Molak bought the neglected structure and began booking acts during what the late Texas songwriter Steven Fromholz dubbed “The Great Progressive Country Scare of the 1970s.”

It was during this time that a young George Strait and the Ace in the Hole Band first played the hall. The word was out about Gruene, which quickly became a stomping ground for popular Texas artists such as Jerry Jeff Walker, Michael Martin Murphey, and Ray Wylie Hubbard.

Willie Nelson even made the scene, packing the place so full he couldn’t walk through the crowd to the stage. Since Gruene Hall had no backstage to speak of, they cut open a screen so Willie could sneak in through the bathroom. “I always thought it was pretty cool that every time Willie would play there, they’d have to get a new screen,” Hubbard says.

Ask any musician in Texas and you’re likely to hear a similarly colorful tale about Gruene Hall, often about a formative show where the venue cast its mystical spell.

For Kevin Russell, frontman for Shinyribs and the late, great Gourds, it was a concert by East L.A. rock legends Los Lobos.

“I got there early to see some of the sound check,” Russell says. “And I saw Cesar Rosas, the guitar player for Los Lobos, walking around and looking at the ceiling.”

Curious, Russell asked Rosas what he was doing. “Man, I heard Hank Williams shot holes in the ceiling,” Russell recalls Rosas replying. “I’m looking for the bullet holes!”

For Old 97’s guitarist Ken Bethea, it was the first concert of his college days, a 1982 set by Tex-Mex rock ‘n’ roller Joe King Carrasco. “Me and my friend and these two girls drove over to Gruene from San Marcos,” Bethea says. “And from 7 to 8 p.m., it was 10-cent beer. And we got an entire platter full.

“Then a rockabilly band opened called the Rattlecats. This was right when the Stray Cats were starting to hit. And I was like, Oh my gosh, they’re just like the Stray Cats. I didn’t know. I thought bands that played at places that weren’t arenas sucked.

“But this band was great. And that was just the first band! Then Joe King Carrasco came out, and I was blown away.”

Bolstered by the cheap beer, a young Bethea introduced himself to the band, proclaiming how they’d changed his life, and earning himself a kiss on the cheek from keyboardist Kris Cummings. “That cemented my love of Gruene Hall,” Bethea says.

A quarter-century later, when the Old 97’s set out to record a live album at the storied venue, Bethea learned his three bandmates had never set foot in the place. He was shocked. “It’s too late to hold it against you,” Bethea jokingly told them, “but I probably wouldn’t have even gotten in a band with you if I had known you’d never been to Gruene Hall.”

Soon this shortcoming was remedied, resulting in the rollicking live set *Alive & Wired*. Listening to the album, recorded during a pair of 98-degree nights in June 2005, you can almost feel the sweat through the speakers. It’s a feeling many a Texas band knows well.

“I think it’s a rite of passage,” Russell says. “To go in that hot box and really still bring your best show.”

“They’ve got some big ol’ fans there, and they open up the windows and it’s not so bad. Usually you’re just hoping some odd cool evening will blow in,” Russell continues, though he also notes the matinee shows—at which many younger acts get their start—can be charmingly brutal.

“I had one time I could not get my guitar in tune,” he says. “And I was trying. But something sounded weird. And it was just the warble of the fans moving so fast above me. I just took a break and said, ‘I’m losing my mind here.’” He laughs. “But people were cool about it, of course. I’ve never seen a crowd sail on anyone there.”

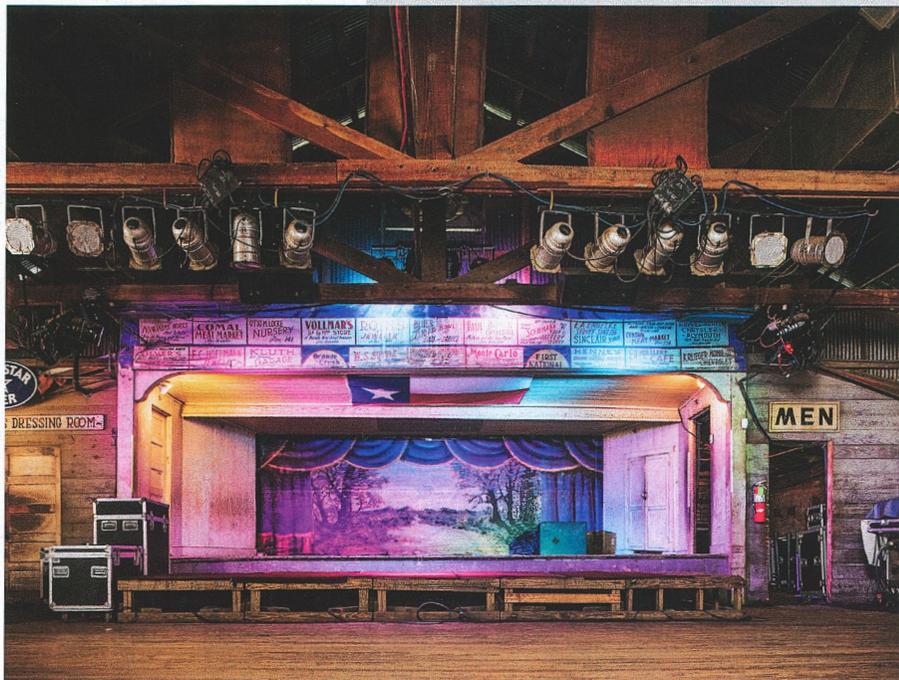
“You better be ready,” Hubbard says. “You better have your chops and the songs and know what you’re doing. But the thing about Gruene Hall, too, is there’s this incredible looseness about it.” Which brought to mind a conversation he had with a fan.

"I was playing there recently, and after sound check this guy came up, and he goes, 'That's a different bass player than you had when you played here last time,'" Hubbard says. "And I go, 'Yeah.' And he goes, 'And that's a different guitar player that's playing with ya now than played here with ya two gigs ago.' And I go, 'Yeah.'"

"And he says, 'Well, man, do you have to rehearse a lot?'"

"And I said, 'Man, it's Gruene Hall, not Carnegie Hall,'" Hubbard says, laughing.

Walk in any night and you'll see what he means. Honky-tonk cowboys in starched jeans and polished boots rub shoulders with bachelorette parties. Retirees relive their wilder years next to drunk college students in flip-flops fresh



off an afternoon on the river. Many nights you'll even find children dancing through the crowd, wide-eyed at the wonder of music played live, spilling like a siren's song into the warm Hill Country air.

"The audience is another member of the band," Hubbard says. "We're all just working together to chase this euphoria."

Russell agrees: "Something that I've learned from playing there so much is that you're part of something. It's not about you. ... Yeah, I'm doing the show, and I'm dancing and doing my thing, but it's really about the moment between everyone there. And that is really cool."

It's this familial vibe that brings so many artists to Gruene Hall, young acts looking to break out and long-established legends coming back for a victory lap. Look at the clapboard walls and you'll find their pictures. Lucinda Williams. Robert Earl Keen. Nanci Griffith. Charlie and Bruce Robison. Kelly Willis. Hal Ketchum. Pat Green. Even King George himself stopped in for a surprise set a few years back.

But as Central Texas weathers an epic population explosion, authentic experiences like a show at Gruene Hall get harder and harder to find, with former Hill Country hamlets converted left and right into subdivisions with big-box stores.

"Willie and Doug Sahm should have kept quiet about the place," Hubbard jokes. "But Gruene Hall has managed to stay the same."

Sure, the crowds are even bigger these days. Gruene, formerly a cotton town and now part of New Braunfels, has thrived too, brought back to life as a historic district featuring acclaimed restaurants like the Gristmill River Restaurant & Bar, souvenir shops, and wine-tasting rooms. But on the right night, with the right band, Gruene Hall is the closest thing in Texas to a time machine.

"I've always felt like old guitars have things in them," Russell says. "They have information, they have songs. And Gruene Hall to me is like a million old guitars put together. Millions of songs and dances and millions of feelings. It's just a wonderful place to be." ★

Visit cowboysindians.com for videos of some of our favorite Gruene Hall performances. 1281 Gruene Road, New Braunfels, 830.606.1281, gruenehall.com



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— The Editors

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