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TWO-STEPPING TRADITIONS

Texas Dance Halls Offer Enjoyment For Both Young & Old



Photo Courtesy Of Gruene Dance Hall

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In Austin, the "live music capital of the world," the city's slogan is Keep Austin Weird. While it is great sometimes to celebrate differences, rural Texas, in stark contrast to Austin, chooses to celebrate similarities instead. In small towns like Coupland, nearby Thrall, and Thorndale, the communities' focus tends to be on how people can come together, not on how they can stand out, partially because there are less people, and friends and neighbors are often the only company available. For this reason, folks in these towns often seek out ways to connect with one another. Additionally, Coupland locals say they prefer to end a long work week with rest and relaxation, not commotion and clamor; for them, a Texas dance hall beats a night club every time.



Photo Courtesy Of Gruene Dance Hall

GRUENE

The difference between a dance hall and a night club is the dance hall's laid back atmosphere. It is usually an older, historical building that has been used for generations of community events. Its clientele consists of mostly families, often hosting multiple generations; teenagers, parents, and grandparents all come together to enjoy a night of dancing and live music. With mainly couples, and fewer singles, the atmosphere is geared more toward family enjoyment.

It is not a fancy place, the very antithesis of grandeur. Neon lights are not required. Its interior is often nothing more than wood floors and a few twinkle lights. It is not elaborate, but rather rustic and relaxed. Your best suit and tie are not required, and the venue welcomes you in your worn out jeans. A Texas dance hall is a place where family and friends can all get together, hear some live music, have a cold beer, and enjoy the end of a long week without worrying about making an impression. As a matter of fact, it is pretty much a rule that worry altogether needs to be left at the door.

Gruene Hall, which was built in 1878 by Henry Gruene of Germany, is Texas's oldest continually operating dance hall. Not much of the décor has changed since then, either. Gruene (pronounced Green) still has a tin roof, open-air window flaps (to let the breeze coming off of the Guadalupe River blow in), and a wooden dance floor. The 6,000 square foot dance hall is rustic to say the least. Seating consists of picnic tables, and the stage, which dates back to the 1870s, lets the audience get up close to the musicians, giving it a more intimate atmosphere.

"As I walked through the doors leading to the stage and back of the hall, I immediately knew it was a special place," said current owner Pat Molak. "The old wood and original stage, combined with the open flaps on chicken wired windows gave you the feeling of walking back in time. I think that's what people still love about it today, the old history that the building exudes. That, and the intimacy of the joint."

In the 1800s the dance hall was used for school dances, graduations, traveling salesmen, and interestingly enough, badger fights as well. It was, and still is, the center of local entertainment of varying kind. It has the historical charm of a building that has been lived in and well loved. It is also a place where memories have been made for over a century, but that has not stopped it from staying relevant.

Today Gruene Hall is an internationally recognized tourist attraction hosting a never-ending string of celebrities as well as up-and-coming new musical talents. George Strait, Willie Nelson, Little Richard, Bo Diddley, Merle Haggard, Garth Brooks, and the Dixie Chicks have all performed there.

Yet the attraction of Gruene is not just the celebrities. To locals, Gruene Hall is like *Cheers*. It is the place where everyone knows each other and gathers together to celebrate, relax at the end of a long week, or discuss upcoming events. Getting to hear the world's best artists is just a welcome by-product.

Out of town guests visiting Gruene Hall like to stay overnight at the Gruene Mansion Inn, a thirty room bed and breakfast with rustic, Victorian décor. It is a great way to enjoy a weekend getaway with concerts at Gruene Hall, a night in the rustic inn, and a day relaxing on the Guadalupe.