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COMMENTARY

Hanks: In Austin, we follow a beat all our own

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Everyone needs a deep, dark secret. For years, mine was NBC's supernatural soap "Passions."

In the early part of the decade, I was faithful to it, never missing lunch with its characters, closely following the tumultuous twists and turns of their romantic lives. I even taped the show when I took a 9-to-5 job, so as not to miss an incantation or a bewitching. The show then featured talking doll Timmy (Josh Ryan Evans), the occasional zombie and a witch, Tabitha Lenox (Juliet Mills), who had narrowly avoided being burned at the stake. Although I stopped watching the show when the supernatural elements were shuffled aside, I was reminded of my devotion when the cable channel Soapnet's "Wanna Be A Soap Star Live!" tour hit Austin late last month.

Wrapped in the glow of my faded love, I went to the Austin Music Hall, expecting to find hordes of housewives eager to win a trip to Los Angeles and a walk-on role in an ABC soap. Instead, I found a ghost town. The parking space right out front ought to have been a clue. Inside, I found booths filled with product samples from companies such as Gillette, with more people behind the booths than in front of them. It was the embodiment of, "What if I throw a party and nobody comes?"

OK — a few people did come, but they seemed to be from out of town. I chatted with two women who had traveled from, respectively, Beaumont and San Antonio. Both of them also had traveled to New York and to L.A. to audition for different seasons of Soapnet's reality TV show "Wanna Be A Soap Star." On that show, participants vie for a contract role on ABC's soap, "One Life to Live."

After a little analysis, I realized that the reason more people didn't turn out at this event was because Austin is a Do It Yourself (DIY) town. Austinites weren't interested in picking up crumbs from the entertainment industry's corporate table.

Austin is full of DIY heroes. Filmmaker Robert Rodriguez is a DIY man. Rodriguez is known for doing everything on his films ("Spy Kids," "Sin City") except tearing the ticket stubs as patrons walk into the theater. Or consider moviemaker Richard Linklater, lauded for making the seminal "Slacker" on a shoestring, now preparing for the big budget release "A Scanner Darkly."

Austin is full of DIY types, and not just at Home Depot. If they want to perform, most Austinites have already formed a band, a theater company, a church choir, an arts collective, a roller-derby league or just gotten their friends together to make a movie. In what other city could 13-year-old Emily Hagins have a premier of her zombie feature "Pathogen" this spring?

The day after the sparsely attended Soapnet auditions, Pease Park was overflowing with Austinites attending Eeyore's birthday. Many were in costume celebrating the birthday of the morose fictional donkey from "Winnie the Pooh."

The most extreme examples of Austin's DIY-ness might have been in the Eeyore's drum circle with me. As I was artlessly banging my battered, low-rent drum, I carefully eyed my compatriots. Across from me was a fetchingly tanned and fit fellow in a straw cowboy hat and yellow shirt emblazed with "The Kid."

He was playing a frying pan, using what looked like a bent screwdriver, (but was later identified as a tack lifter.) The dude next to him bashed a blue enameled cake pan with a regulation drumstick. Next to me, a man played a fancy store-bought drum. He had a stick of incense firmly clamped between his teeth, invoking an old-time gangster chomping on an aromatic stogie. The only thing missing was a naked Matthew McConaughey and his bongos.

Since my time in the drum circle, I've been laid low by a recurring lung malady. And to alleviate my boredom, I've returned to "Passions."

Careful study of "Passions" has revealed that the defining characteristic of a soap opera vixen is that she's willing to do anything to get what she wants. No plot is too outlandish, no scheme too fraught with difficulty, no man too married. Nothing stands between a vixen and her desires — especially if she's Theresa Lopez-Fitzgerald (Lindsay Hartley) from "Passions."

Theresa wouldn't have stood in line for a walk-on role in a soap. She'd have filmed her own movie and let the world beat a path to her door. Austinites avoided the Soapnet tour because our city is full of real-life vixens, women who create what they want without waiting for permission. We don't have many "wannabes" here.

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