

## OPINION

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## COMMENTARY

## Hanks: ACL Fest is just too much of a good thing

**Anna Hanks, REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR**

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This is the tale of two bands. One's country. The other, rock 'n' roll. Both are from Austin and both played ACL Fest on Saturday. The sultry heat made Zilker Park feel like a party inside a vegetable steamer.

The South Austin Jug Band (country) and What Made Milwaukee Famous (rock 'n' roll) drew perhaps the shortest of scheduling straws. Both were sharing a time slot with jam band The String Cheese Incident and The Raconteurs, whose catchy single is "Steady, As She Goes." That's like having your TV show opposite "Monday Night Football" and "CSI."

The four guys of WMMF played at 6:30 p.m. on the Austin Ventures stage. Many 20- and 30-something's crowded in to hear WMMF's dreamy keyboards on top of rocking drums and guitar. Their performance came after a wearing afternoon of interviews. Trailing them like a noisy shadow with a notebook, I saw them run the media gantlet, including interviews with: Austin's Music and Entertainment cable channel, LA's Indie 103.1, Germany's Musikexpress magazine, and an on-air interview for Austin's KLBJ, including the station's Sesame Street-style promo "The letter W is brought to you by WMMF."

Much of the WMMF fuss was generated by the re-release of its originally self-released CD "Trying to Never Catch Up" by Barsuk Records. Barsuk is to current indie pop what Memphis' Sun Records was to Johnny Cash and Elvis in the '50s.

I had chosen to shadow WMMF because it was one of only two ACL bands with which I had any connection.

In January 2002, I spent a feverish week in a five-star hotel in Rome with Drew Patrizi, WMMF's keyboardist. Banish your thoughts of rock star decadence. Patrizi and my then-fiance were in Rome providing lights and sound for an IBM event. The feverishness was literal, and Patrizi and I both ought to have visited an Eternal City doctor. Instead we coped trading foreign cough drops and packets of stiff Italian tissues.

Despite my Patrizi connection, ACL Fest was my first time seeing WMMF. I haven't even managed to watch the Austin City Limits show that the then-unsigned band taped last year, on the evening of its first ACL-Fest performance. WMMF told me the ACL broadcast has been huge for them.

Alas, for Patrizi and the rest of the band, the buzz meant they missed watching much of ACL. As Patrizi explained on Sunday, before leaving the festival to set up for his ACL aftershow at Emo's, that's what happens when you're working music festivals. You end up working, not watching.

But only 10 minutes after WMMF's show started, I ran over to see The South Austin Jug Band, a band I had seen once before at ACL. Five years ago, my husband and I had braved the first ACL Fest to see the SAJB because we had a passing acquaintance with the band's guitarist, dreadlocked Willie Pipkin. Back then, I walked Asha, the playful pooch of Pipkin's roommate. I'd sometimes see Pipkin between his morning fishing and his night gigs.

We hadn't seen the SAJB members since that first ACL. As documented on their 2002 CD "Pickin' & Grinnin'," they were then a serviceable bluegrass band. Despite the name, they never had a jug player.

Like ACL Fest, the SAJB has matured remarkably during the past five years. Playing a gazillion shows, and adding the fiddle and mandolin players Dennis Ludiker and Brian Beken, have taken the SAJB to an astounding new level. The song "Dark and Weary World," from the same-titled CD, is still stuck in my head after hearing it last Thursday at KGSR's Unplugged at the Grove.

In contrast to the hectic schedule of WMMF, the SAJB members had a relaxing Saturday. For their fourth ACL, singer James Hyland told me he'd kept himself fresh by spending Saturday lounging in AC'd comfort on Poodie's bus. Poodie Locke is Willie Nelson's longtime stage manager.

That first ACL Fest, we were huddled under a tiny tree, and the SAJB audience was sparse. This year, the band played the shaded BMI stage. There was a large, multigenerational crowd, despite the challenging time slot and the blowing dust that accentuated the band's dustbowl melodies.

Dashing from WMMF to the SAJB to WMMF and back to the SAJB, I was living the dichotomy of Austin's music scene. Too much going on at the same time. Too many competing musical styles. Too, too, too much. Like Thanksgiving, this very excess is what makes ACL good.

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