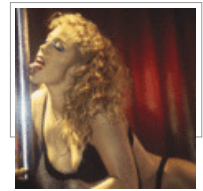
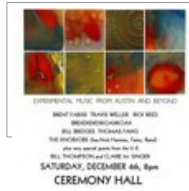


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Is it Latvia...or ACL?

Editors' note: Back in July, Austinist writer Anna Hanks visited Latvia and attended the [PositivusAB Festival](#) there. She reports her findings here, to you, in the ever-rarer first narrative format. Enjoy.

Earlier this summer I ended up backstage with electronic music uber-dude [Fatboy Slim](#) (aka Norman Cook) at a music festival in Salacgriva, [Latvia](#). Luckily the beatmaster king didn't know that I was so sick with an ear infection that I nearly threw up on his shoes.

Given that the entire post-Soviet [PositivusAB Festival](#) was freakily like some tiny, storybook version of our Austin City Limits Music Festival, I was no more surprised to be backstage with the headliner than I would have been seeing a white rabbit scurry by, checking his pocketwatch to insure he wasn't late for the [Manic Street Preachers](#).



Santa mock-up in tree at PositivusAB Fest.../Anna Hanks

"Oooh, I love mash-ups!" said Cook, when my DJ friend Dace presented Cook with a demo made by another Latvian DJ. I'm pretty certain that Cook gets something like this little bundle of homemade electronic hope at every tour stop, yet he seemed Christmas-morning delighted about getting the CD. Cook even politely read off the track titles in his cute British accent, made appreciative murmurs, then checked for [artist](#) contact information on the disc.

If Cook had promptly vanished into the ether of the festival, leaving only a Cheshire Cat smile behind, I wouldn't have been more surprised. Considering I'd slept in an abandoned backstage dressing room the night before, that's saying a lot.



A festive festival cart/Anna Hanks

The second—ever Positivus Festival took place over two days in mid-July in the tiny coastal town of Salacgriva, Latvia, not far from the capital of Riga. Salacgriva is on what was once the heavily patrolled western edge of the Soviet Union. Look for it on the map between Sweden and Russia. Look hard. The entire population of Latvia is around 2.5 million people. That's only slightly larger than Houston. It's a place Americans hear little about, which is why I was surprised to hear Obama name-check Latvia during the recent town hall debate.

You might think it's unlikely that an Austin gal would end up in a music festival in rural Latvia. *Au contraire*, I ended up at Positivus *because* I'm an Austin girl. In Austin the world beats a path to our door. A few years ago I covered the SXSW visit of Latvian singer-songwriter [Goran Gora](#) for [The Baltic](#)

[Times](#), an English-language newspaper based in Riga. Making friends with those Latvian music industry folks led me to Positivus. Music brings people together in ways that occasionally go beyond a drunken mid-festival hook-up.

Positivus is billed as the biggest music festival in the Baltic States (the post-Soviet countries of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia). As such, it combined eerily familiar bits with highly unusual things.

I had my first *we're not in Kansas* moment when my Latvian friend and I pulled into the festival camping area. The newly mown site had most certainly been a functional field back in Soviet Times, and you could still see the faint remains of the furrows left by long-ago plows. Luckily I soon saw a skinny dude in tie-dye hanging out in the camping area, so I knew that, at least spiritually, I wasn't so far from Austin.

The setting for the festival was a lot like a Texas state park from an alternate reality. The decaying Soviet-era infrastructure lingers, but wasn't used for the festival. The food court sat smack dab on the old stage area, while the vintage bench seating was used for sunbathing and napping. Everything seemed so like ACL; until I realized that they were selling Latvian pancakes in the food court, and beer I'd never heard of at the bar. It was all so eerily familiar and yet totally alien that I was half expecting the drinks to be labeled "*Drink me*".

Walking around the festival to see acts like [Pienvedēja Piedzīvojumi](#) and the [Satellites LV](#), I was continually a little freaked out by how much the event reminded me of ACL—except that the entire thing was in Latvian. With 18,000 people attending over two-days, it was closer in scale to Fun Fun Fun Fest. Yet it had that same quasi-hippy-happy musical picnic ACL vibe, without the 65,000 sweaty ACL attendees. Positivus was pop, not punk; sweet not snarly. It was as close to cuddly as a music festival could be. The festival was small enough that I kept running into my new Latvian acquaintances who usually greeted me by name, and asked, in English, how I was doing. Turns out that being a Texan is a privileged position in the Baltic States. Since Latvia is a member of NATO and the EU, and a stop on the Ryanair stag party and sex tourism circuit, they get plenty of English-speaking visitors. They just don't get so many Texans.



A festival festival of one sort or another/Anna Hanks

Like ACL, Positivus had a tent selling festival tee-shirts, and a stand or two selling arts and crafts. Positivus had hippie-green types, promoting various Baltic green causes. You could swim in bracingly cold water with algae floating on top while looking up at the trees. Yet this wasn't Barton Springs, it was the Gulf of Riga. Those Baltic trees were pine or birch, not pecan. The Positivus audience had fewer tats and piercings than one finds on Red River. I also now understand why my Latvian pals view my earplug habit as unusual, as I only noticed two other humans at Positivus with hearing protection. One was a toddler wearing those [ear muffs](#) most famously worn by Apple Paltrow, while the other was a

cameraman.

While Positivus was eerily like ACL, there were some key differences—like the weather. Ironically, given their temps in the high 70's Positivus distributed the festival schedule printed on funeral home fans. I never felt the need to fan myself. At ACL, despite the “cooler” temps this year, I was still worried that my snowcone might catch fire.

Of course, the flipside to the cool temps at Positivus is that, after dark, I was freezing while wearing a hoodie and long pants in July. Freaky, especially when there were skinny dudes still barefoot in their bathing suits next to me.

There were other differences between the two festivals. Unlike ACL, Positivus had no lawn chairs to trip over. There weren't many people over 40. I watched pickup games of Latvian soccer, played on the empty mainstage lawn with a footy finesse you just don't see in Austin. Most disconcertingly, there were dogs patrolling the rim of Positivus, keeping out gatecrashers who weren't willing to cough up the 30 Lat (50 dollar) entrance fee. Maybe I've seen too many WWII films, but I found the German Shepherd perimeter patrol eerie.

Positivus really started for me with a performance of the Swedish group “I'm From Barcelona,” (which is one of the reasons I'd wanted to go.) I didn't think it was bloody likely that they'd be hauling their multi-member group all the way to ATX anytime soon. What better place to see them do the song, “Collection of Stamps” describing them having, “One from Spain, two from Japan...” than a pan-Baltic music festival? Barcelona lead singer Emanuel Lundgren did his quasi-circus act of spewing confetti, crowd-surfing in a swim-raft and releasing lots of tiny red-balloons. It was like a lab puppy of a show: super sweet, but leaving hell a mess in its wake.

Near the end of the Friday night performances at Positivus, I totally worried that Scottish group Travis was tempting fate when they played, “Why Does It Always Rain On Me?” but the clear skies held for the festival.

As the sun was coming up around 3 a.m, my friend and I went rock-n-roll camping, collapsing on couches in the vacated dressing rooms. (Neither of us own a tent.) Fittingly, I had ended up in the dressing room of “I'm From Barcelona.” Their discarded luggage tag confirmed that they really had come from Stockholm earlier that day. Confetti and guitar strings littered the floor, and a bunch of empty bottles crowded the table. Shivering ensued, under the toddler-sized blanket that I had bought earlier at the grocery store.

At Positivus, Saturday night featured British Sea Power. After seeing the Brighton group's amazing show on Maggie Mae's rooftop at SXSW in March, I hadn't wanted to miss them playing in Latvia. They were followed by Fatboy Slim, wearing the neatly pressed shirt I'd seen hanging in his dressing room backstage. At ACL, I didn't even see where the backstage entrance was, much less get past security to hang with the rock stars.

While Positivus was eerily close to ACL in many ways, I'd be stretching the truth to see multiple similarities between Austin and Latvia. Yet Austin calls itself “The Live Music Capital of the World,” while Latvia's tourism materials tout it as, “The Land that Sings.” They have a band called Mofa. We have a Governor who has used the term mofa

It really is a small world, after all.

Contact the author of this article or email tips@austinist.com with further questions, comments or tips.

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By [annainAustin](#) in [Arts and Entertainment](#) on October 16, 2008 3:25 PM

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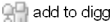
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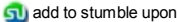
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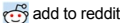
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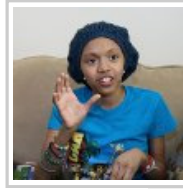
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cpencis 2 years ago

How incredibly cool! My dad's family emigrated from Latvia (via Germany post WWII - but that's another story) and its so cool to see good stories of the 'home country' joining the EU and becoming more and more independent. Thanks so much for the story and notes! One day I'll get to Riga and other places I've been told about...

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alonsita 2 years ago

Ha ha! I really enjoyed your story! It's like a movie to me. I have been to ACL back in '07 and I loved it but I haven't been to Positivus - yet, though I am from Latvia! From my experiences living in Austin for a year - US is bigger than I thought and music is amazing everywhere, either on 6th st, or ACL, or sxsw. It is just highest level I have experienced. Of course after all, Latvia is a tiny bit in every thing. I have something to compare now and will certainly try this mini ACL next year, if it's still gonna be on!!! lol! I hope that your overall experiences there weren't too bad, such as weather that is normally horrible, and the trip was fine! ;)

[Like](#) [Reply](#)



anns 2 years ago

Yep, the festival is on for next summer, starting on July 17th! Tickets are on sale now for 50 bucks--including camping!

Like Reply

Real-time updating is **enabled**. ([Pause](#))

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