

Written by Allan Besselink
Tuesday, 20 September 2011 17:38



The 2011 [Austin City Limits Music Festival](#) was the 10th anniversary of this three day musical extravaganza. It has been quite a decade of live music on the great lawn of [Zilker Park](#)

. Once again, it provided me with a strong reminder of the beauty of live music and the powerful messages it can deliver.

Music has a way of pulling people together – or at least putting them back on the same page if only for a moment or two. The complex interplay of notes - and spaces between the notes - breathes life into the old, and passion into the young. I guess I still have a mixture of both. When played by those having that special musical genius, you are witness to something that is simply beyond understanding and comprehension.

Such is the power of music. And such are the delights of ACL.

The 10th anniversary of the Austin City Limits Music Festival had many delights. With that in mind, here is my own brief personal diary of this year's festival.

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Day One: The first day of the Festival had what I would call a logjam of great music. Why is it that all the shows you want to see are all packed into a few slots?

[Ray LaMontagne](#), a very talented singer-songwriter, started the day off nicely. This was followed up by Foster The People. This band's members all looked like they were in high school – at least the ones I could see from a mile away. It was a fun show, but it was also a reminder of how I am getting older and the bands are getting younger! Then it was on to the Vista Equity tent for a fantastic double shot of soul and rhythm and blues with some gospel thrown in for good measure. If you have never seen James Brown, then a few moments with Charles Bradley should suffice – less the dance moves, of course. That is something that few can reproduce!

[Mavis Staples](#)

then took command of the room, belting out some gospel-laced songs with her incredibly powerful, soulful voice.



Then it was time to put on those walking shoes to catch a few moments of [Sara Bareilles](#) and then make the call:

[Kanye West](#)

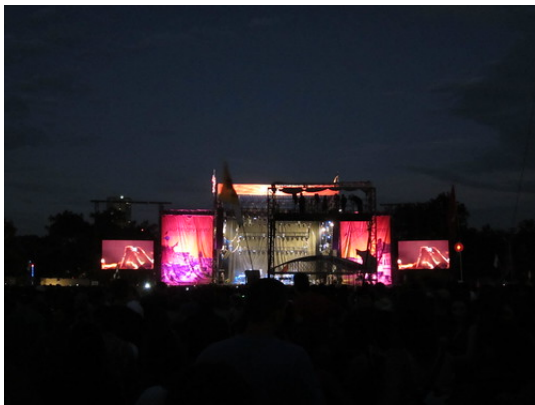
or Coldplay? Well, how about both? After about 20 minutes of being bored by Kanye's diva-ness, it was time to run across the Great Lawn to catch some Coldplay. A much better choice, indeed. No mind-numbing bass, just good clean musical lines. Maybe that shows my

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age as well – i still prefer real guitars to sampled ones.

Strange quote of the day goes to the woman that barged past us to get a better view of Mavis Staples. She muttered “Chairs only have so much power”, I guess in reference to the fact that we had chosen to get there early and sit down and wait patiently. I was fully aware that staking out some space with my folding chair wasn’t going to stem the tide of listeners, but apparently this woman thought that this was a moment to make it a socio-culturo-political manifesto of sorts. I had visions of Che Guevara yelling “chairs only have so much power, we shall fight to the stage until our death or until our ears bleed with the reverberation of electric guitars”. Or something like that.



Day Two: The second day of ACL provided the first day in I-don’t-know-how-long that we actually had rain. No, the sky wasn’t falling and the world wasn’t ending – or at least that’s what they tell me. Yes, real honest-to-goodness rain that made the second day memorable for reasons far beyond just music. I guess it took the power of 65,000 music lovers to get it to rain in Austin.

There was no secret about Day Two – it was all about [Stevie Wonder](#) . Sure, I caught Cee Lo on stage before him, but that was primarily for the purpose of seating more than anything else. Although Wonder was about 20 minutes late to the stage, his show was epic. I think you only realize how broad his scope really is when you listen to 2 hours of his musical genius. Then you start to realize that this man has penned some amazing works, some incredible songs and chord changes, throughout his illustrious musical career. I have always leaned towards his funkier tunes, and I was not disappointed. He played “Higher Ground”, “Superstition”, and “I Wish” (with one of the best bass and guitar lines ever). Ahh the sounds of a Hohner Clavinet under his deft fingers. Funk brilliance exemplified.

In “Sir Duke”, Wonder writes -

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“Music is a world within itself / With a language we all understand / With an equal opportunity / For all to sing, dance and clap their hands”



Those words would summarize the Saturday night show quite nicely. There is a certain feeling that you can have at a live show, when it feels like you are experiencing music that is special or almost otherworldly. This was certainly one of those moments. It was a rare opportunity to see Wonder and experience firsthand his true musical passion and genius.

The award for “Most Idiotic, Ignorant Concert Attendees” goes to all of those smokers who blatantly ignored both the smoking ban and the (far more important) burn ban in effect. These people – and there were far too many of them - looked straight at the “no smoking/burn ban signs” and still lit up. Worse yet, the same people then dropped their butts onto the grass, apparently feeling all the more relieved because of the minimal rain that did finally appear. It’s not about your right to smoke, folks – it’s about the right of all of us to have a safe venue, and a safe community. Central Texans have lost enough as it is, and we don’t need anyone helping to create a greater fire risk for our community.



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Day Three: The final day of ACL provided some easier choices. First up was Ryan Bingham And [The Dead Horses](#) , a band that I had been exposed to for the first time last year at ACL. What a great live performance from a great live band. That set the tone for the day, and it was probably the best band that I witnessed on the third and final day. Jack Ingram was good, but he just was not Ryan Bingham.

Then there was Randy Newman playing solo to a packed house. There is much to be said about man and instrument, alone on the stage. It is a very solitary time of expression. Newman's wit and sense of humor permeate his songs. He is truly a thinking man's musician.



The evening ended with Canadian headliner Arcade Fire. I can use one word to describe them: under-whelming. I still, to this day, don't quite understand what all the commotion is about, even if they are from my home nation.

Arcade Fire did have one of the best quotes from the Festival, noting that it was odd to be playing at a festival in which all the participants were praying for it to rain. A rare sight, indeed.

All in all, it was a great three days of music, food, and even some much-needed rain. Thanks to ACL for bringing us an amazing decade of music – at least what I have seen over the years – and onwards to another 10 or more.

Addendum: In case you may have forgotten what Stevie Wonder's roots really sounded like (in and amongst some of his more commercial ventures), just check out the clip from "Sesame Street" circa 1972. I am glad I was a kid growing up in THAT era! Teletubbies just don't compare to Grover and Cookie Monster groovin' with Stevie!

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