










COMMENTARY OCT 6

ACL Fest sells a watered-down version of the Texas mythos

 *Anna Hanks, Contributor* 

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Two years ago I flew out of Austin just after the Austin City Limits Music Festival and noticed everyone in my row was sporting an ACL wristband. It wasn't a total coincidence.

According to festival organizers, in 2015, 27 percent of their attendees were from out of state and 3 percent were from outside the U.S.

That percentage of non-Texas folks was evidenced last week when I bought a heavily discounted ACL ticket from visiting students from Yale. They were selling their absent buddy's \$250 three-day wristband for \$130.

I popped into Zilker Park as Houston's Blue October was hitting one stage and Texas-born Maren Morris was hitting another. For a moment I was on a hop-on, hop-off tour of Texas music.



Walking around the park I saw lots of Texas themed merchandise. One could buy a Texas-print bandanna at Waterloo Records or a striking photograph of Willie Nelson from Austin photographer Greg Davis.

As afternoon meandered toward evening, I ended up chatting with a former South African who had long lived in the U.S., bonding over British supergroup "Radiohead." The expat told me that listening to the Afrikaans of the South African shock group "Die Antwoord" made him homesick.

What was a former South African doing feeling homesick at a Texas festival?

Reflecting on the groups I had heard at ACL, like the Charleston, South Carolina band "Band of Horses," I realized that there wasn't much genuinely Texan at the event. The ACL Festival is as authentically Texan as a Starbuck's Pumpkin Spice Latte is authentically a harvest season product. That's problematic because ACL is diluting the mythos of Texas by selling wagon loads of Texas dude-ranch dressing.

Texas has a mythology that extends way beyond our borders. One-time Texas Governor George W. Bush rode our Texas mythos into eight years in the White House. Former Texas Governor Rick Perry tried to follow Bush's cowboy trail but his ride stopped at "Dancing With the Stars."



Diplo of American electronic music band Major Lazer performs during day 1 of Austin City Limits Music Festival held at Zilker Park on September 30, 2016 in Austin, Texas. AFP/Getty Images

This Texas mythos might have contributed to the long line of folks waiting to get in to the Official ACL Festival store, while the stall selling merchandise from the festival's bands had no line. Among the items on offer at the ACL store: a shirt with the Yellow Rose of Texas, items with a rainbow version of the state seal of Texas and a T-shirt with "Austin City Limits" superimposed over a Texas flag. Sales were brisk and many people at the park were wearing festival gear.

After waiting in line 25 minutes to enter ACL on Saturday, I trudged into a Miller Lite "Game Room" seeking shade and a chair. There I found a depiction of a Texas flag with a representation of a can of Miller smack in the middle. This made me angry. Miller Lite is not a Texas product, it's from MillerCoors of Milwaukee.

Why does it matter that a private event in Austin is more hat than cattle with its Texas-ness? That ACL seems like Coachella in cowboy boots?

Over its 15 years, the ACL Music Festival has become one of the our bigger Texan cultural exports. It's so well known that I've been frantically cleaning my house because I'm expecting a traveling Canadian friend to crash on my sofa during the second weekend of the festival.

Red Bull live-streamed ACL for people to view far outside of Texas. In New York, Samsung was showed that broadcast on a three-story screen at an event that featured Texas cooking demonstrations. According to Forbes, there were 450,000 admissions to the ACL Music Festival in 2015. That's double the 218,798 people who took a tour of our Texas Capitol between August 2015 and August 2016.

If ACL keeps diluting our Texas brand we're in danger of losing a real asset: our valuable regional distinctness in this era of increasing global homogenization.

The festival is held in a public park but it doesn't do a good job of representing Texas. The closest approximation of Spanish I saw was "Live Mas" on a Taco Bell flag some dude was dragging. A festival that's using a public park and co-opting the Texas mythos to make bank ought to do a better job of presenting Texas to people who aren't from 'round here.

Maybe sometime Big Tex can make a visit to ACL Fest, and show them how to represent Texas right. Or maybe Willie Nelson headlining Weekend 2 will help.

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OPINION

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