

A salute to what makes Austin great connects townies with SXSW festers

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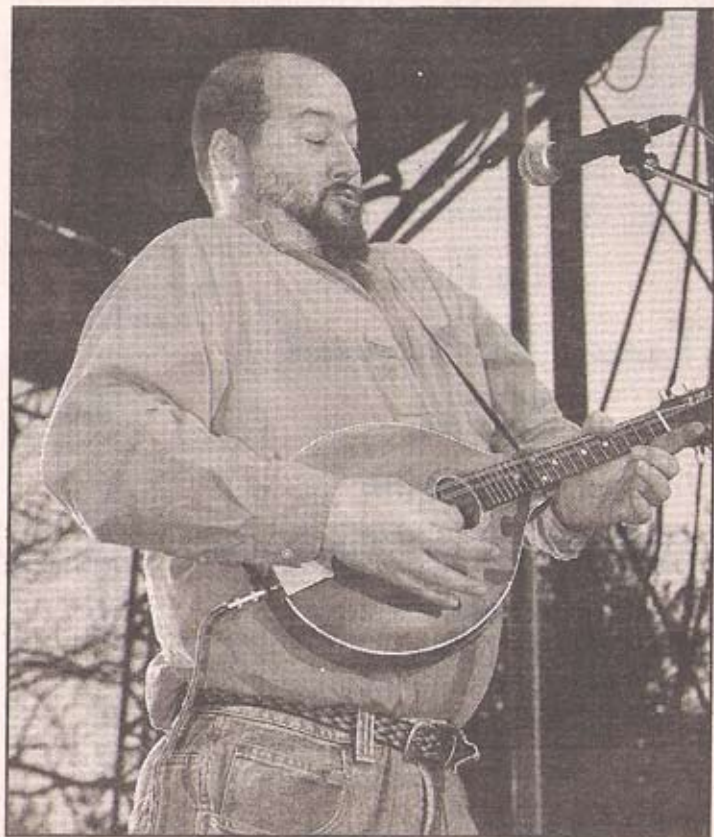
The rain stopped, the clouds parted, and the mud finally dried. But what really made Saturday's SXSW-sponsored outdoor concert in Waterloo Park as successful as a Tom Waits ticket-scalper, was something the organizers of the music conference always have a better handle on: Austin.

Headliner Guided by Voices was a nice touch, but the three local acts on the free bill — the Damnations, Spoon and the Gourds — were the reason for the smiles on most of the faces of the 10,000-plus attendees. Oh sure, here comes the hometown boosterism thing again, just in time to bid all the funny-looking out-of-towners farewell . . . thanks for coming . . . don't forget your cell phones . . . and don't move here.

Actually, the city's visitors deserve a round of applause, too, though a few more of them could have remembered to take off their registrant badges early Saturday evening. Not only did plenty of them show up for this Austintatious event, they added to the mix, like one of Willie Nelson's Fourth of July Picnics with an extra world and a lot more hair-dye meshed in.

I wish I could say that an ocean of people swaying their

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Kevin Russell and the Gourds served up their feel-good, country-Cajun-redneck-hippie songs.

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behinds to the Gourds' saucy "L.G.O." or bobbing their heads to the staccato-rock of Spoon's "Car Radio" is a regular sight in town, but it's not. How fitting that both the Damnations' Deborah Kelly and Spoon's Britt Daniel told the crowd, "Hi, we're called the (insert under-known band-name here)." Mingling in the crowd before the lo-fi, cool-vibe punk of his "Not Turning Off" and "Metal Detektor" would win over more than a few converts, Daniel pointed out that Saturday's audience was the biggest his band had ever played to, something also probably true of the Damnations.

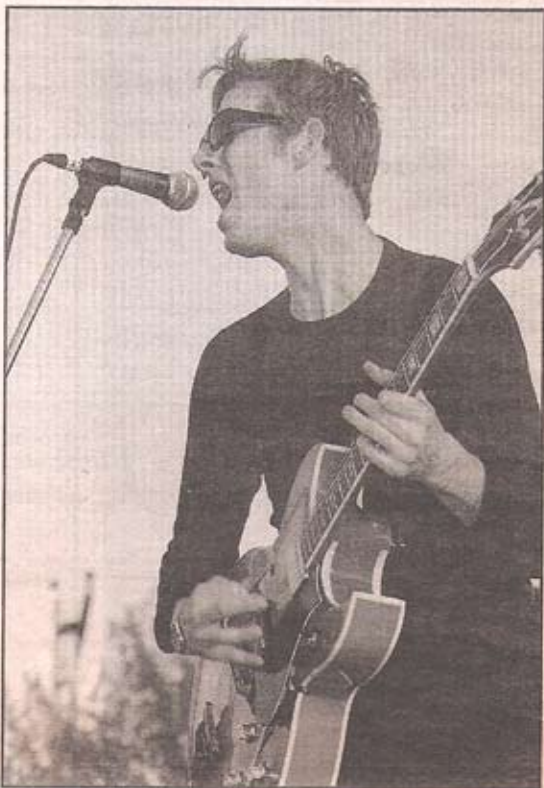
Where the previous night's Waterloo Park show offered two acts people already know Austin for (Joe Ely and Fastball), as did the previous year's lineup there (Jimmie Vaughan and Junior Brown), this one was SXSW staff going out on a limb to promote some of their favorite bands and the idea that Austin's unique musical paradise still thrives.

These were the right players to make the point.

"This is a song about eating chicken, smoking marijuana and getting married," said Kevin Russell to introduce one of the dozen feel-good, country-Cajun-redneck-hippie songs that the Gourds play so well they could relax a fire marshal. Earlier in the evening, the Damnations lent proof to the buzz surrounding its Sire Records debut, "Half Mad Moon," striking a Southern rock groove in "Unholy Train" and sending the crowd into lap-slapping mode with its do-si-do-ing "Kansas."

Having Dayton, Ohio's indie-rock veterans Guided by Voices top off Saturday's lineup was a perfect way of tying the show in with the rest of SXSW, with the band's critically-revered style indicative of many of the conference's finest hours. Tearing through a sturdy selection of its vast catalog — from the pop-frilly "Teenage FBI" to the electrical scorcher "Flat Beauty," with "Cut-Out Witch" working both crowd and band into a frenzy early on — GBV proved its most recent lineup (including ex-Breeders drummer Jim McPherson) hasn't hindered singer Bob Pollard's cult-deity status.

OK, we officially had a high note. This thing can end now.



taylor johnson/aa.s

Britt Daniel of Spoon sings to his biggest crowd ever in Waterloo Park.