

Austin City Limits: 35 Years in Photographs

By Scott Newton, edited by Terry Lickona and Scott Newton, foreword by John Mayer, with assistance from Michael Toland. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010) \$40.00 cloth, 204 pp. ISBN: 978-0-292-72311-5.

Austin City Limits (ACL) is the longest-running popular music series in American television history. Launched in the mid-1970s as a showcase for Texas regional talent, ACL has expanded over the years to embrace a wide range of American and international music. With its superlative production standards and intimate concert setting, ACL has achieved a legendary status in the music world and in the process has helped to establish the Capital City's reputation as a music capital. Since 2002, the Austin City Limits Music Festival has become one of the premier music festivals in the United States.

For more than three decades of ACL's history, house photographer Scott Newton has had a front row—and backstage—seat at the action.

Many of his photographs have appeared in two previous compilations: Clifford Endres's *Austin City Limits* (University of Texas Press, 1987) and John T. Davis's *Austin City Limits: 25 Years of American Music* (Billboard Books, 2000). The present

35-year compilation was assembled by Newton and veteran producer Terry Lickona, and features almost 300 color images of full-stage scenes, closeups, evocative details such as musical instruments and even shoes, as well as crowd shots, all of which only a photographer who attended every show with full access could create. Even the handful of black-and-white shots feature such iconic moments as a handshake between bluegrass legends Bill Monroe and Ralph Stanley, as well as a stage full of legendary songwriters—among them Guy Clark, Emmylou Harris, and Willie Nelson—gathered to render their tribute to the late Townes Van Zandt. The photographs are presented in alphabetical order, from Arcade Fire to Willie and the Wheel, but really in no chronological or thematic order, thus giving further emphasis to ACL's eclectic mix. They are printed on heavy black stock that mimics the darkness that surrounds the dramatic scenes on stage and in a large format roughly the size of an LP record liner. The large format allows for two or three good-sized images of each artist for greater dramatic impact and detail.

This compilation is much more than a nice picture book for the coffee table. In selecting the “best of the best” from thousands of images, Newton and Lickona sought to move

beyond the photographic record to explore the significance of the ACL experience and the very process of making music. In his “Photographer's Preface,” Scott Newton writes: “It's been my life's work...to photograph the musicians who have appeared on our stage, and to attempt to capture a sense of the invisible muses who move them.” Newton found that muse in Jack White of the Raconteurs (2006), about whom he wrote: “Jack White has it. That thing called variously, charisma, stage presence, gravitas. The whole thing: riveting movement, powerful, piercing voice. Obviously, his body is inhabited by an immense soul.” But the photographer confesses that his all-time favorite ACL show was Leonard Cohen (1988): “Deep and significant, his almost-painful delivery affected me like a sacrament, and I've never been the same since witnessing what a master can do.”

For his part, producer Terry Lickona says in his introductory note, “[A]t its best, a photograph should capture you, the viewer, as well,” likening the book to an interactive experience, where readers can compare their emotions with the ones that jump off the page. Some of the photograph captions feature similar insights by Newton or Lickona, but most telling are the statements by the artists themselves, taken from ACL's own oral histories over the years. They take the reader into the mind of the performers as they reflect on playing at ACL or pursuing their own muse. One of the featured performers, John Mayer, wrote in his own foreword: “[W]hatever I do on that stage, it's going to matter. The faces in the crowd will be preserved on tape forever...and I want their faces to reflect exactly how I feel: connected to the music, proud to be in the room, and proud to be in front of that Austin City Limits skyline.”

This book will appeal to specialists—scholars, photographers, musicians, journalists, etc.—as well as the general public, which will include many long-time viewers of Austin City Limits. Everything about this volume and the artists it portrays reflects lofty standards of creative effort, whether it be the musicians giving their all to honor their hour on that special stage, the photographer seeking to capture their performances in transcendental images, or the layout designers at the University of Texas Press crafting an elegant publication worthy of it all. Spend a while with this volume and you will see that producer Terry Lickona is right about the emotional impact of Scott Newton's photographs: they do capture in that fleeting second the kinetic energy, the personality, the setting, the moment, and—dare we say?—the muse at work.

John Wheat