

The South Austin Popular Culture Center

Stephen F. Austin



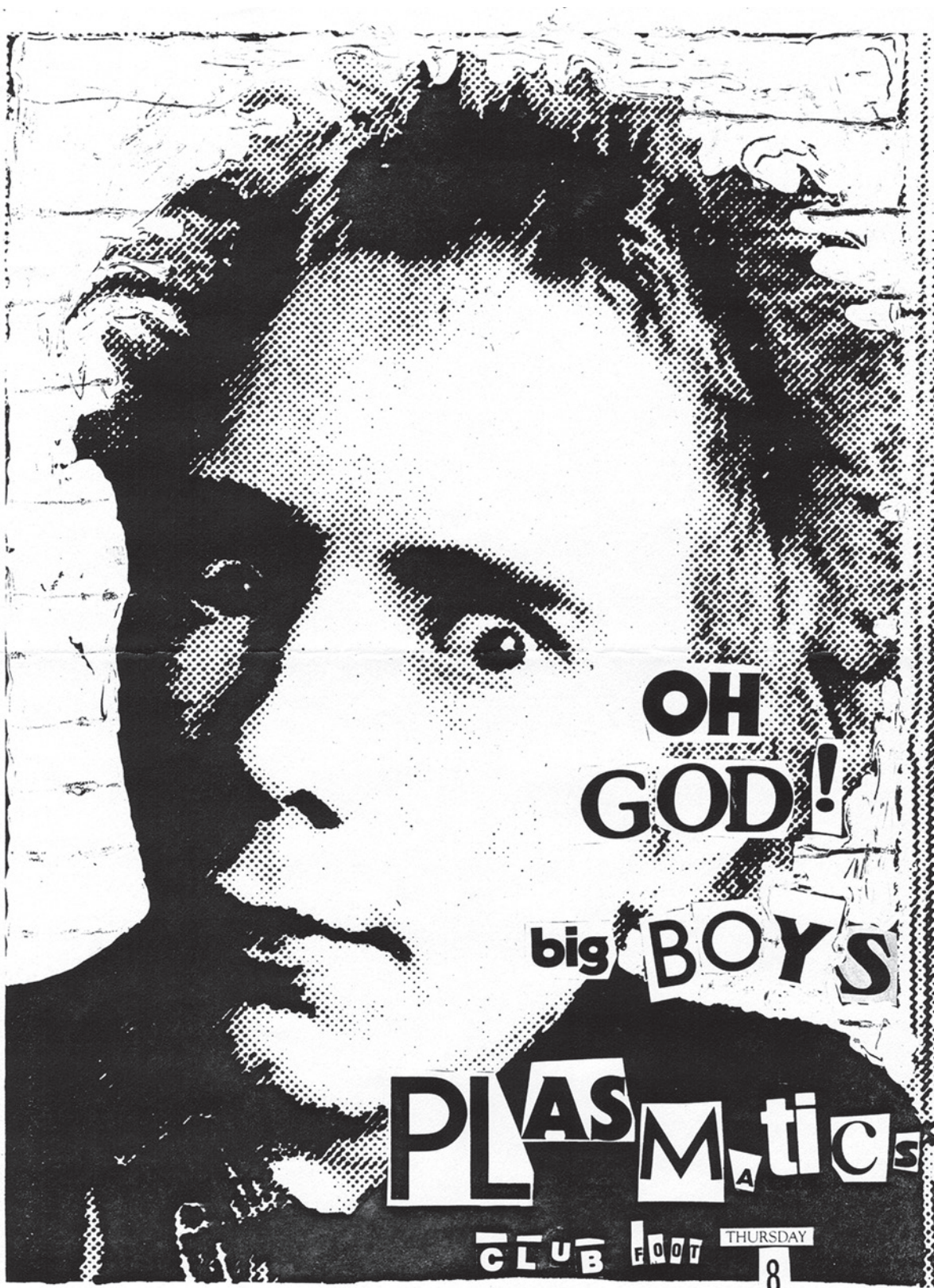
On August 7, 1970, the Armadillo World Headquarters opened at 525½ Barton Springs Road in South Austin. This part of the city, located just south of the Colorado River and only blocks from downtown Austin, has historically been a working-class neighborhood populated mainly by Anglos and Hispanics. Although it may have been near the downtown business district, the State Capitol, and the University of Texas, the area seemed in many ways economically, socially, and culturally distant from the city's commercial, political, and educational centers just across the river.

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The opening of the Armadillo World Headquarters, also known as the Armadillo or simply the "Dillo," helped change the cultural and economic status of South Austin. And while this part of town had long had its own unique and eclectic culture, the Armadillo served as a catalyst for Austin's burgeoning countercultural music scene in the 1970s. It also reinforced a feeling of pride among local residents in their self-declared quirkiness, perhaps best expressed by what would eventually become an unofficial slogan representing the city's unique cultural character: "Keep Austin Weird."¹

From its first concert on August 7, 1970, until its final show on December 31, 1980, the Armadillo World Headquarters provided a focal point for Austin's musical counterculture. However, the Armadillo's role in shaping the city's cultural identity was by no means limited to music. The core group of artists responsible for the venue's posters and handbills also created a large body of visual imagery that helped define and reflect the cultural spirit of South Austin. Artists such as Jim Franklin, Jack "Jaxon" Jackson, Bill Narum, and Ken Featherston comprised the Armadillo's so-called "Art Squad," which was responsible for many iconic posters promoting Austin's music scene. The creative energy that linked music, visual arts, and journalism during these years went a long way toward defining a modern sense of what it meant to be Texan.

At the height of the Armadillo's popularity in the mid-1970s, members of the Art Squad considered launching a collective effort to showcase, preserve, and promote Austin artists and their work. However, it would be 2004 before organizers founded the South Austin Popular



Club Foot handbill. Courtesy South Austin Popular Culture Center.



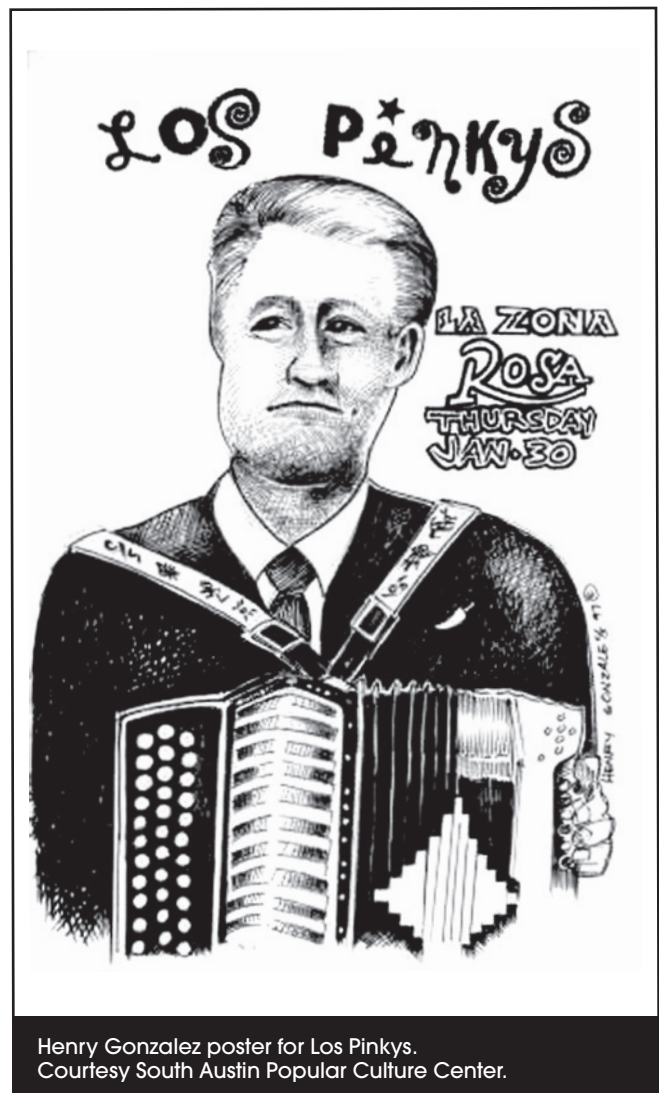
Outdoor stage mural designed by Kerry Awn. Courtesy South Austin Popular Culture Center.

Culture Center, which in 2005 was formally established as a 501(c)3 tax-exempt organization at 1516-B South Lamar Boulevard.²

Starting with efforts to collect, store, and display concert posters from the Armadillo Art Squad, the center has worked to preserve the legacy of Austin's counterculture and popular arts through exhibitions, collection, and scholarship. Executive director Leea Mechling began displaying the pieces collected by the center in solo exhibitions, initially featuring the core group of the Art Squad. Jim Franklin was the first artist whose work the center put on exhibit in 2004. For the next year, each member of the Armadillo Art Squad enjoyed his turn in the spotlight, with exhibitions of the music-related posters, handbills, comics, and artwork of Kerry Awn, Danny Garrett, Guy Juke, Henry Gonzalez, Bill Narum, Micael Priest, Sam Richardson, and Sam Yeates.

The South Austin Popular Culture Center's focus has since grown to encompass much more than the poster art of the Armadillo years. While the original motivation was to preserve Austin's countercultural creative energy that radiated from such iconic live music venues as the Armadillo World Headquarters, Threadgill's, the Vulcan Gas Company, the Austin Opry House, and Antone's, the center's move to become a collecting and exhibiting institution for photography, prints, ephemera, and literature has helped to widen the conversation about the Austin cultural scene.

With over 64 exhibitions to date, the South Austin Popular Culture Center continues to collect and preserve past and present representations of Austin culture. The center's exhibition space is open to the public Thursday through Sunday from 1:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. Typically, the center includes the featured artist

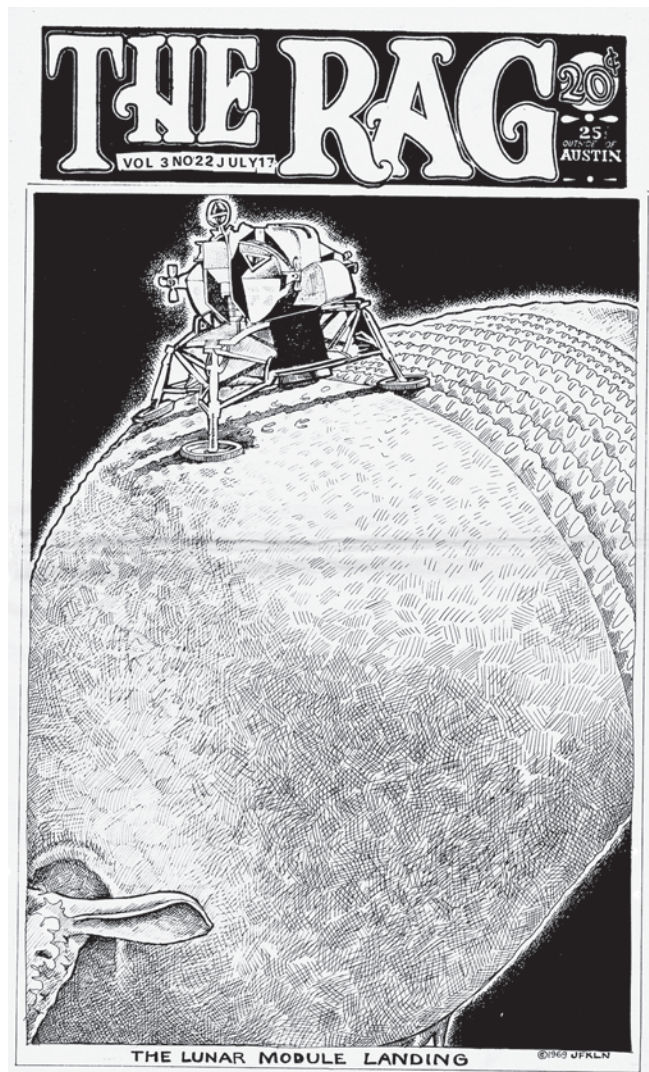


Henry Gonzalez poster for Los Pinkys. Courtesy South Austin Popular Culture Center.

and other pioneering cultural figures in each exhibit's opening reception. This allows visitors to meet and interact directly with the artists responsible for the iconic images.

As one might expect, music is often part of the exhibit festivities. Several Texas bands, including the Uranium Savages, Joe King Carrasco, the Nortons, and Van Wilks, along with members of Greezy Wheels and Krackerjack, have performed on the center's outdoor stage, which includes a colorful background mural festooned with such comical characters as Wonder Warthog, the Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers, Hank Hill, and Oat Willie.

The center's diverse exhibits have ranged from the underground comics of Gilbert Shelton to the eccentric sculptures, paintings,



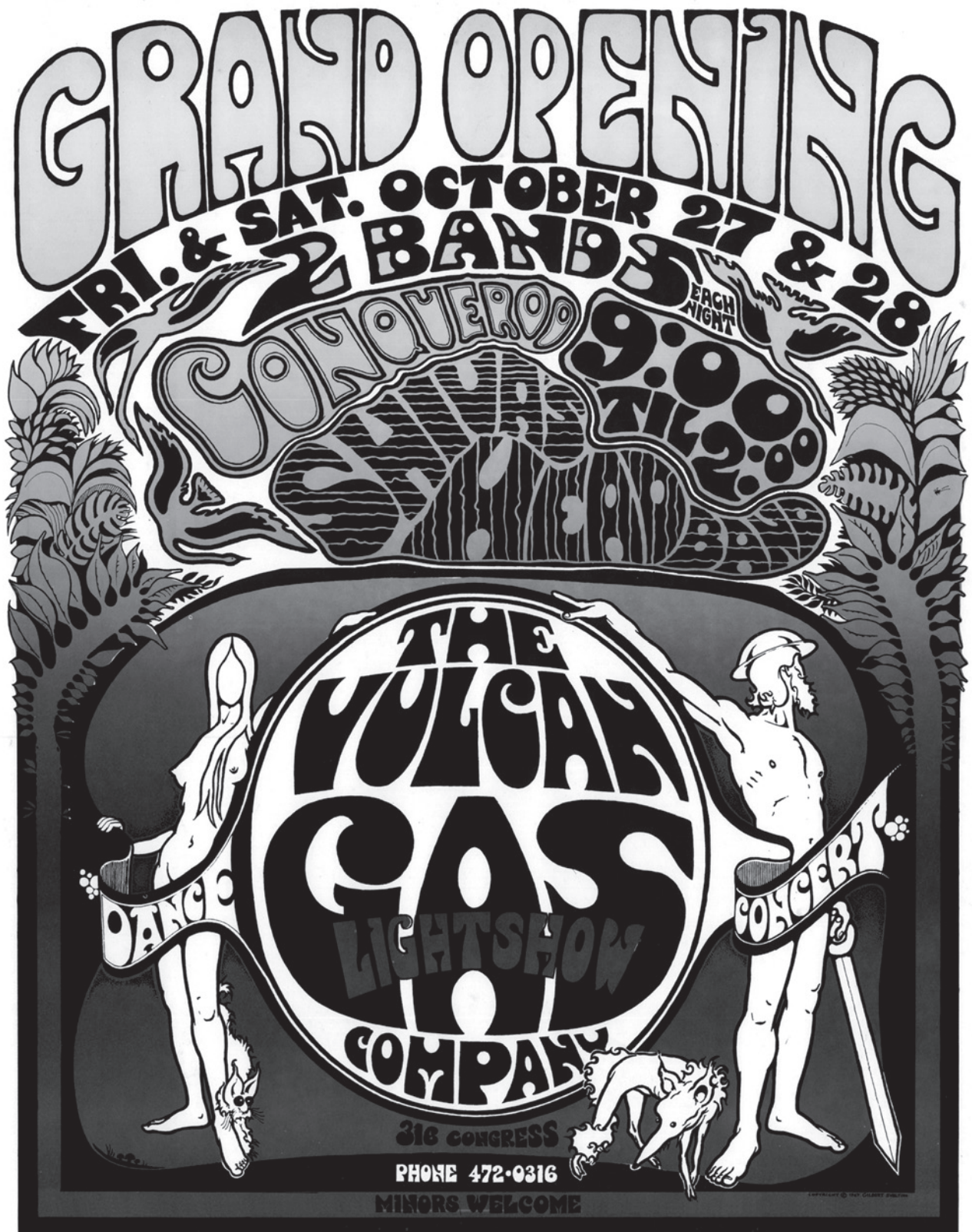
Jim Franklin cover for *The Rag*.
Courtesy South Austin Popular Culture Center.

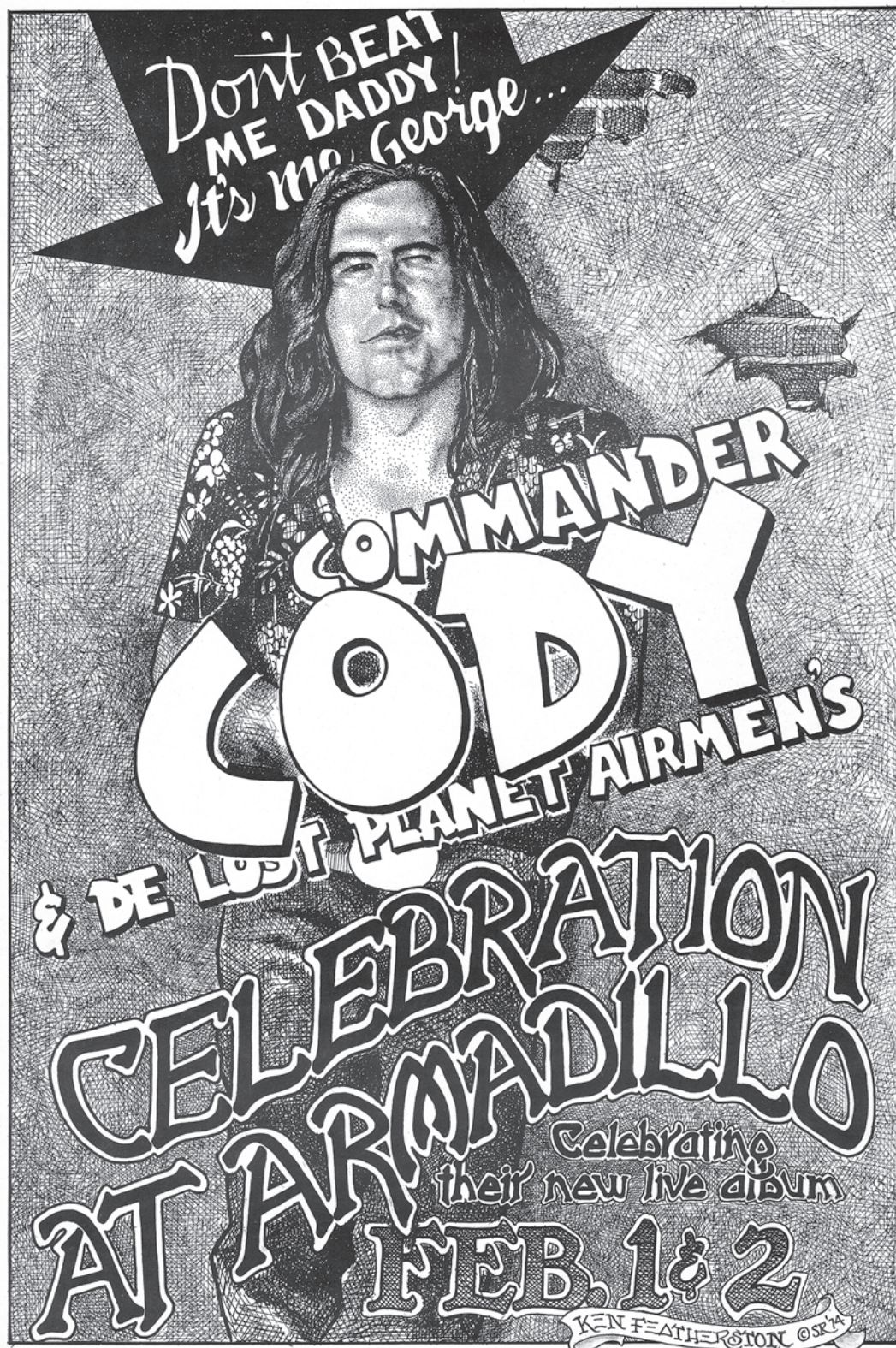


Hub City Movers, *The Chicken Song*.
Courtesy South Austin Popular Culture Center.

and public works of Bob "Daddy-O" Wade. The center also has focused on contemporary Austin culture with such exhibits as the "Punk Pioneers," which showcased Austin's punk scene of the 1980s. To that end, the center has highlighted modern art with the collection of Jim Harter's surrealist works and Lindsey Kuhn's silk-screened posters, originally designed for display in the punk clubs along Austin's Red River Street.

Furthermore, the South Austin Popular Culture Center's exhibitions have covered Austin's countercultural press by featuring publications from the contemporary *Austin Chronicle*, as well as its alternative predecessors, the *Austin Sun*, the *Rag* and the *Ranger*. In addition, the center has amassed a large collection of photography documenting the evolution of the Austin music scene. Exhibits have featured renowned photojournalist Alan Pogue, Mack Royal's chronicling of the Ritz Theatre, and a collection of recently unearthed photographs by Van Brooks





Ken Featherston poster for Commander Cody. Courtesy South Austin Popular Culture Center.

that include Austin images of music icons Patti Smith, the Allman Brothers, Willie Nelson, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, and Janis Joplin at her last performance in Central Texas.

The primary strength of the South Austin Popular Culture Center lies in its extensive collection of posters, handbills, flyers, and photographs documenting the Austin scene. Although the center's archives skew heavily toward Austin's visual culture, the collection also spans a wide range of publications and ephemeral artifacts, including the clothing of local artists and musicians, the Jim Franklin-designed ticket window from the Vulcan Gas Company, small airplanes and cars turned into decorative art, and even a lock of Elvis Presley's hair.

The center provides access to its collection for scholars and researchers upon request. Director Mechling also hopes to expand the center's online digital archives in order to increase public access. While it is not formally affiliated with any university or governmental research institution, the South Austin Popular Culture Center is an important resource that welcomes anyone wishing to learn more about the city's cultural history.

The center plans to continue diversifying and expanding its role in documenting the unique culture of Central Texas and also hopes to serve as a model for historical and cultural

Charlie Parker in Sweden 1950

Recorded November 24, 1950 at Halsingborg, Sweden.

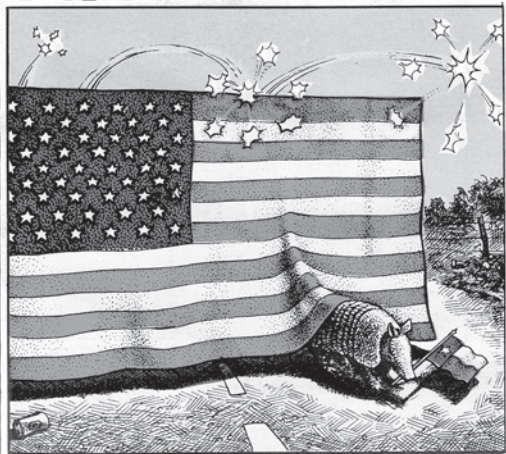


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Vintage ad by Henry Gonzalez. Courtesy South Austin Popular Culture Center.

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Jim Franklin poster for Willie Nelson's Fourth of July Picnic.
Courtesy South Austin Popular Culture Center.

preservation efforts in other Texas cities, including the new South Texas Popular Culture Center in San Antonio. The South Austin Popular Culture Center's emphasis on Austin's history and local culture will help to preserve and perpetuate the countercultural tradition that has made the city the creative capital it is today. For more information, including exhibitions, events, and collections, please visit the center's website: www.SouthAustinCenter.org. ★

Notes

- 1 For more on the Armadillo World Headquarters, see Jason Dean Mellard, "Home with the Armadillo: Public Memory and Performance in the 1970s Austin Music Scene," *Journal of Texas Music History* 10 (2010): 8-21. See also John Wheat, "Armadillo World Headquarters," *Handbook of Texas Music*, 2nd ed., Laurie E. Jasinski, ed., (Denton: Texas State Historical Association, 2012), 19-21.
- 2 "History," South Austin Popular Culture Center website, <http://SouthAustinCenter.org/home/history> (accessed July 17, 2012).