

# Kindred Spirits: Long Live The Dive Bar

A LOVE LETTER TO AUSTIN'S ICONOCLASTIC WATERING HOLES

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By Laurel Miller



*Sam's Town Point in South Austin photographed by September Broadhead.*

**WHEN I LEARNED THAT** **Hard Luck Lounge** was closing last November, the news hit hard. One of my favorite Austin bars, it also signified the measured ending of an era. Dive bars across America – many located in neighborhoods founded or historically populated by specific ethno-racial groups – are an endangered species, the victims of skyrocketing rent, gentrification and now, pandemic-related closures.

“Dive bars are essential to Austin and the city’s history,” says Travis Tober, co-owner of **Nickel City**. “We’ve always embraced the true dive; they’re one of the last remaining places where people of all walks of life can still hang out in the same room, and Austin is better for it.”



*Nickel City co-founder Travis Tober photographed by Holly Cowart.*

While the criteria for a dive bar is somewhat subjective, I've always believed there's no such thing as a "new" dive, which is why I was shocked to learn Hard Luck Lounge opened in 2015. Everything about the space, from the faded, crimson flocked wallpaper on the back bar and stamped ceiling tiles to the decrepitude of the building hinted at a long, colorful history (while previously a beer garden, I was unable to find any other details on the property).

With a few notable exceptions, then, my definition of a dive is an establishment of a certain age, patinated by decades of history, hard living and cultural transition; they're dark and redolent of old cigarette smoke and stale beer. Dives may be honky-tonks, blues clubs, LGBTQ+ spaces or sports bars. But enter one and, even obfuscated by gentrification, its long-time regulars provide a snapshot of that neighborhood's socioeconomic and cultural demographics. When a place like **Victory Grill**, the black-owned Eastside juke joint that hosted the best blues musicians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, shuttered, the loss is about more than just a family-owned business. We lose a part of Austin's identity.

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*Eclectic memorabilia line the walls of the nearly 70-year old Deep Eddy Cabaret. Photo by Jackie Lee Young.*

The most formidable foe faced by Austin's dives is development. "The remaining dive bars often service neighborhoods with the most expensive real estate," says Tober. Demand for prime properties means bar owners are often faced with losing their lease or being forced out to make way for new construction, resulting in the loss of iconic establishments that often serve as cultural touchstones. While **The Cloak Room** downtown is still open and very much a splendid dive, Tober points to it as a storied example of Austin – and state – history. "That bar has probably hosted just as many important meetings for Texas politics as the Congress Building," he says.

The Cloak Room may have its share of secrets, but like most dives, it's ideal for people-watching and interacting with a diverse patronage. It doesn't bother me if bartenders are salty, because dive bars exist on the fringes of the hospitality industry. They're there to serve patrons free of the bells, whistles and **craft cocktails** that are denote upscale watering holes. Conversely, many stewards of the dive bar are gregarious, but their gimlet eye hints at late nights and multitudinous encounters with sometimes nefarious clientele.

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*Year-round Christmas décor compliments delicious drinks at Lala's.*



My favorite Austin dive bars are microcosms of specific subculture, like **Donn's Depot**. The rambling, ramshackle Westside honky-tonk hybrid is primarily patronized by older Austinites (I fondly refer it as, "God's Waiting Room") who two-step and sway on the dance floor. It's the first bar I ever visited in Austin, having stumbled upon it during a post-prandial walk and yet, it felt like home. When my parents, ages 87 and 93, came to Austin last fall, I took them to Donn's where they danced – albeit slower than they used to – while owner Donn Adelman's band played. It's one of my favorite memories.

I'm similarly fond of **Lala's Little Nugget**, where even non-Crestview residents are treated like beloved regulars. Permanent Christmas décor and folkloric history aside (it's rumored that former owner Francis Lala decorated the bar in December, 1972, when her son shipped out to Vietnam with a vow to take the frippery down only upon his safe return), I find it's the staff, patrons and jukebox that make Lala's special, in addition to its status as a neighborhood bar. Fortunately, FBR Management (Mean-Eyed Cat, Star Bar) felt the same way, which is why they purchased Lala's after Francis retired in 2015.





*"The best dives embody Austin's scrappy, independent, often-weird spirit," says Miller. Sam's Town Point photographed by September Broadhead.*

Likewise, **Deep Eddy Cabaret** – the closest thing my Clarksville neighborhood has to a local watering hole – serves as reminder of a largely bygone Austin. It's shabby and scruffy after nearly 70 years of operation. The juke rivals Lala's, the day drinkers are grizzled and, like Lake Travis's Dry Creek Café (an epic dive in itself), you can practically paddle patio-side for a drink. Every time I visit Deep Eddy or **La Perla** – the no-frills Tejano holdout on the East side – I'm suffused with happiness.

From **Sam's Town Point** to **Carousel Lounge**, the best dives embody Austin's scrappy, independent, often-weird spirit, while holding fast to pages of its past. Let's not lose the narrative.