

# Helping musicians keeps the music alive in Austin

Can you imagine your life without music?

Really think about it, and not just about right now.

Think back through all the different stages of your life, your treasured memories, the rough seas and the stretches of smooth sailing, lonesome thoughts and spontaneous joys shared with friends and loved ones. Chances are you'll remember songs and tunes along with them.

Rather than where were you when you first heard a song or a musician, think of the performers and their music and remember who you were then and who was with you in your life. To paraphrase lines from Austinite James McMurtury's recent CD "Complicated Game," songs write our lives. They remind us of our common humanity, in big ways and small.

This is no new development. In the period that is the focus of my research at the University of Texas at Austin, the late Greek Bronze Age (1600-1200 B.C.), the oral songs that defined the culture most people think of as the golden age of Greece were already being sung.

On a wall painting to the right of the royal throne in the sacred hearth room of the Palace of Nestor at Pylos (1200 B.C.), a colorfully robed male singer, lyre in hand, sits outdoors on a well-worn rock outcropping. A mythical bird flies off toward the throne, symbolizing the "winged lyrics," the phrase Homer uses to describe the magical way inspired music reaches our ears.

Three centuries later, as professor Joann Hack-

ett reminded us in a recent presentation to our UT Institute for Scripts and Decipherment, from excavations of a shrine at an Israelite-Judean caravan stop in the eastern Sinai, we have large storage jars with painted "Hebrew blessing formulae and cultic scenes." Prominently depicted is a seated woman lyre player, perhaps singing out the blessing.

And the Rev. Will Rambo of Tupelo, Miss. — fittingly the birthplace of Elvis Presley — recently observed, after watching shepherds at work during a trip to the Holy Land, that the image of Jesus as a good shepherd derives partly from the fact that at herd collecting stations where shepherds brought their flocks for protection at night, there were no problems in the morning separating out whose sheep were whose. The sheep really do know their shepherds' voices from hearing them sing their pastoral songs, just as I instantly recognize a Denny Freeman, Richard Jesse or John Inmon guitar riff or a line sung by Carl Hutchens, Jesse Gregg or Jimmy LaFave.

Pope Francis recently took aim at the "disastrous" homilies his flock of faithful hear from their priests, words that "do not reach the heart." You know you cannot say that about the Austin musicians you regularly go to hear. They reach your heart.

Now try to imagine Austin without live music. A frightening thought, isn't it? It will never become a reality so long as we continue to be good shepherds to the 9,000 musicians who, according to Chris Alberts, director of development for the Health Alliance

for Austin Musicians, now live and perform in the Austin area.

History also proves unfortunately that being a musician, literally one of those dedicated to the arts of memory goddesses known as the Muses, generally involves an itinerant lifestyle and getting by on the kindness of strangers. Few Homeric or Judaic bards, medieval minstrels, Appalachian folk singers, blues artists on the chitlin circuit or British shoegazers were free of troubles with money. Few of their descendants who perform at the Cactus Café, Poodies Roadhouse, the Saxon Pub, the Mohawk, the Gallery or the Skylark Lounge have large investment portfolios to manage.

HAAM got started in 2005 because the late Robin Ratliff Shivers was contagiously passionate about the music in her life and had the crazy idea that musicians should have access to regular medical, dental, vision, hearing and psychiatric care. She went about making that happen. Austin foundations, businesses and individual donors, too many to mention, have made it possible for the 60 percent of Austin musicians who do not qualify for subsidized medical plans and the 40 percent who have gaps in coverage to protect their health before crises develop.

If you enjoy the sounds you hear Austin's talented musicians, young and old, making, go to [www.myhaam.org](http://www.myhaam.org). And remember Austin's ever more challenging cost of living the next time the tip jar is passed.

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