

Keep Austin full of good vibes, good people

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"One day you'll open up your eyes and you'll see where we are." Bob Dylan, "Sugar Baby"

When I first began visiting Austin 20 years ago, there were no colossal highway overpasses. U.S. 183 was the northern limit of town. Beyond it, Georgetown literally was "a conversation away," and the conversation was not two hours long or punctuated by prayers for deliverance from semi trucks and Indy 500 wannabes.

Traffic may be hopeless, but the rest of Austin isn't. The slogan "Keep Austin Weird" means that enough people are opening up their eyes and seeing that the essence of Austin is individuals devoting unique talents to the archaic notion of other people. The ancient Greeks had a special word for this: *kharis*. Its Indo-European root has yielded words such as "yearn," "exhort" and "charisma" in modern English. They are tied together by the idea that good acts will create good feelings so that the people involved will naturally yearn or feel publicly exhorted to do more good.

I have lately experienced special forms of *kharis* in the one area that most attracted me when I moved to Austin: music. The *kharis* I am talking about is local and personal, requires risk, hard work and dedicated passion and brings blessing and joy -- two more meanings of the word *kharis* -- to the doers and the receivers. The particular doers and others like them around Austin deserve our deep thanks -- yet another meaning of *kharis*.

Over in Hancock Center is what we used to call a record store. This one is named Jupiter Records. Jupiter's purple-hued planetary logo is so beautifully sleek that when it opened in 1998, I assumed it was a national franchise and avoided it like Dracula avoiding sunshine. This was foolish.

Jupiter is a local sanctum for live and recorded music, the realization of a shared vision by former Houstonians Ryan and Jason Enright.

I found this out at a Bob Dylan concert. Ryan, who lives and breathes Dylan, and Jason, whom Bob recently phoned to talk about a Gibson guitar purchase, ran an atypical ad before the concert. It was a photo montage of rare images of Dylan with the simple "*kharis*-matic" words, "Bob, Thanks for Coming Around." Obviously moved, Dylan claimed from the stage that he bought all his records at Jupiter. If Bob did, I would, I reasoned.

The store itself is designed for performance and listening. Like the Coen brothers, the Enrights had planned out all details in advance. The contours of the CD cases, the colors and lighting and acoustics, and the listening and performing space were part of a meticulously crafted business plan by two twentysomethings who have had to earn their own ways since their teenage years. The atmosphere they have achieved says, "Enjoy music here."

Drop by Jupiter on a Friday night and you are likely to hear local musicians playing in an intimate setting. These free Friday shows have been going on for more than four years and have included special events such as 24 bands in 24 hours. But stop in any time to listen and to talk jazz, blues, folk, rock, classical and standards with two guys who now even produce music in a store with a local community orientation.

On the other side of town, an older Austin musician and business owner, Ron Edelman of Capital Music, is fulfilling a lifelong passion by promoting an innovative group instruction technique for piano. Pilot programs have taken root in three Austin-area schools: Kiker and Hill elementary schools and St. Francis.

Teachers use Roland electronic pianos that enable students to play along with music, alter tempos and experiment with sounds. They learn technique, theory and the joy of improvisation and composition.

The Roland system was featured in The New York Times in January as also being successful with older beginners. I can attest to that. I began piano, my first instrument ever, in September at age 51 with a wonderful teacher Wendy Valentic and five fifth- and sixth-graders at St. Francis School.

I have seen the kids weekly revel in confidence, competence and the fun of hard work. I have also heard them perform in two semester-end concerts without terror and with elegance and improvisational grace.

In the past year, well more than Austin children have begun a true love affair with music thanks to Ron and their teachers. To Ryan, Jason, Ron and all Austin music performers, teachers, businesses and supporters, I say "eukharisto," modern Greek for thank you.

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