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## Austin in Available Light

*British historian Derek Sayer, author of an important new book on Prague, spent the past year in Austin. At the end of his time here, TEOA asked him for his parting impressions of the city.*

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*I wish I was in Austin  
In the Chili Parlor Bar  
Drinking mad dog margaritas  
And not caring where you are*

When I'm traveling I take hundreds of photographs. What bits of the landscape make it into my hard drive is serendipitous—other than the occasional gas station or diner, everything between Austin and Galveston and Galveston and New Orleans is missing from the photographic record of the road trip we took in March because I was doing the driving. It was my first time in Galveston so I'll always remember it as it looks in my pictures—lights glinting on the harbor, cranes with their tops cut off in the fog.

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When I'm staying a while, as I have done in Austin these last nine months, the record gets patchy for other reasons. I slip into the routine of work and leave the camera at home. I say I'll come back and shoot this or that but when I do the light is all wrong. Even when I have the camera with me as often as not that elusive "decisive moment" gets lost while I'm fiddling with the focus.

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All the images here were shot without flash or zoom or autofocus, in available light. Small and unobtrusive, with a reassuringly old-fashioned look and feel, the Leica M9 is a great camera for street photography.

*Stuff that works, stuff that holds up  
The kind of stuff you don't hang on the wall  
Stuff that's real, stuff you feel  
The kind of stuff you reach for when you fall*

Only the M9 is a high-end digital camera, and the RAW files recorded on its sensor have all been "developed" in Adobe Lightroom. There is nothing new (or specifically digital) about that. The human eye is incapable of seeing the depth of field captured in Ansel Adams' photographs, shot on a large format camera at f64, but it is through those images that America came to know and love the Rocky Mountains.

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These images will likely be my most lasting souvenirs of Austin. Back in England I shall call them up from time to time and probably feel achingly nostalgic. I spent twenty years of my adult life living in North America, and Texas is much like Alberta (oil, country music and pickup trucks) except warmer in winter.

But there is irony in the term “souvenir”—the French word for “to remember”—for as time slips by the images will take the place of memory, standing in for times and places that are gone beyond recall. In the end what I’m likely to remember most is less the city—unless maybe I’m listening to Sam Baker—than the photographs.

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Just up the street from us the Omelettry, an old-fashioned diner with hokey murals and a kick-ass ABLT, is closing its doors this summer after 32 years on the corner of Burnet Road and West 49th Street and moving to Airport Boulevard. The rents have gotten way too high.

Next door the Noble Pig has opened to long lines and rave reviews. The Pig offers fancier sandwiches—anyone for pecan smoked beef brisket, kimchi, white onion and sambal mayo?—and does a nice line in retro sodas. During the renovations they uncovered an old, faded Dr Pepper ad running the length of the frontage above the door. They have retained it and chosen a font for the new Noble Pig sign to match.

The font vaguely but powerfully recalls kinder and gentler time of uncertain date but unmistakable resonance. We can argue forever about if and when the “real” Austin ended but authenticity is in the eye of the beholder. I suspect that so long as it keeps reinventing itself in the image of its recollected pasts, keeping it weird, the city will do just fine.

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Perhaps it was an imagined Austin I photographed to begin with. But I shall miss it.



The Jackalope, 6th Street Game Day

Lyrics from Guy Clark's *Dublin Blues* and *Stuff That Works*.

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