



A Short Strange Trip To The South By Southwest Festival

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I went to South by Southwest for the first time since 2002. My how times have changed.

Back then, I was a law student on spring break, looking for a good time and finding it at this quaint little music festival that had just started gaining national acclaim. Sixteen years later, as a grizzled policy wonk with a newborn and a toddler at home, I was looking for sleep more than diversion. This was a business trip — I was there to speak at a First Amendment event organized by the Newseum Foundation — and any entertainment was mere happenstance.

Luckily, SXSW delivered again, with a disorienting mix of trendy tech panels and sweaty queues to nowhere. The music festival didn't even start till after I returned to the real world.

But apparently I wasn't the target demographic. It's not that "South by" doesn't necessarily cater to 40-year-olds specializing in constitutional law and dad jokes, but that it's a "safe space for the resistance." Indeed, there was even an avant-garde music/art program incorporating yarn and wires into something called "Conductors and Resistance." (Get it?)

In other words, I had somehow stumbled into Davos for the hipster set.

"Artificial intelligence, blockchain technology, and the ever-more-fraught relationship between platform and publisher felt like some of the other themes du jour, but," that *Vanity Fair* write-up described in an on-the-nose summary, "much of the buzz revolved around Donald Trump." And not just the president himself, but an alternate universe where trust-fund babies compete with would-be Keith Olbermann go-fers for a place on Al Gore's latest cross-platform startup.

Just look at some of the presentations on offer: Let's Tech the Borders Down, Return on Inclusion: Investing in Diverse Startups, The Authoritarian Playbook, Diversity and Inclusion in the Sports Industry, RompHims and Boyfriend Jeans: Ungendering Fashion, Why Ethereum Is Goint to Change the World, and of course Jake Tapper's interview of Bernie Sanders. (Not to be confused with the Bernie Sanders impersonator — not Larry David — who conducted a town hall.) And that's just the first day!

I actually attended the CNN opening-night party referenced in the aforelinked piece. It was crowded and the apple old fashioned were too sweet. I missed Dan Rather and David Axelrod — at least Brian Stelter attended my panel — but you'll excuse me for skipping a return visit to that venue for Axe's interview of Jon Lovett the next morning in order to work out.

By the time I got to the *New York Times* party, it was late and there was a long line even for those of us "on the list." So I just went to Sixth Street and got my fill of non-SXSW music — even if it wasn't quite as good as my last Nashville trip, when I discovered the incomparable Eskimo Brothers while honky-tonkin' down Broadway.

The next morning, Fox Sports House — which had taken over the Hangar Lounge (across the street from CNN's base at The Market & Tap Room) — featured international fare in a nod to the network's upcoming World Cup coverage. It turns out that kimchi tacos and Hoegaarden go surprisingly well together, but the boisterous mood was spoiled by programming that built on the previous day's wokeness. I now know that my personal hell is listening to three appropriately diverse and gendered humyns stringing together buzzwords from the digital and corporate worlds. It makes one wistful for a discussion of firearms policy with Beto O'Rourke.

The highlight of my visit was undoubtedly local radio personality Dave Hill's interview of Dick Cavett, the comedian and talk-show host. Cavett's heyday was long before mine, but hearing a legend tell stories that would've gotten him twitter-mobbed today made all the inanity worth traversing.

On the other hand, someone who'd never be ratioed is the judiciary's "Twitter laureate," Fifth Circuit Judge Don Willett, with whom I lunched across from the convention center. Willett only recently moved a few blocks from the state supreme court — his handle remains @JusticeWillett, which perhaps will be apt again in future — and is still settling into his new digs. Here's hoping that the tweetin' judge returns to his normal digital activities once he takes his new colleagues' temperature.

In sum, do visit Austin — I recommend downing Shiner Bocks and Stubbs BBQ at a Johnny Cash-themed dive bar called the Mean Eyed Cat — but skip South by Southwest unless you're getting paid for the pleasure.

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