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THE third bar I walk into, I find exactly what I'm looking for.

On a tiny stage in front of perhaps 40 people, a blues-rock trio is launching into one incendiary version after the next of songs by guitar legend Stevie Ray Vaughan.

The band's kick-drum reads "The Eric Tesser Band", it's Saturday night and I'm on 6th St in Austin, Texas — the self-proclaimed Live Music Capital of the World.

That a city in Texas should hold itself out as the global centre of any sort of cultural activity might seem a bit of a stretch — this is, after all, the state that gave the world tycoons in cowboy boots, all-you-can-eat barbecue and George W. Bush.

But as people who live here keep proudly attesting, Austin ain't really Texas.

A defiantly Democrat stronghold in a Republican state, Austin has long embraced creative bods of every stripe and musicians most of all.

This streak of rebellion can probably be traced back to 1966, when a blues-wailing banshee named Janis Joplin busted out of

# Hot nights in the cauldron of music

Cameron Wilson discovers the roots of a US city that lives to rock.

Austin's frantic hippie cafe scene and took the rock 'n' roll world by storm.

By the time the Vaughan brothers, Stevie and Jimmy, came riding out of Texas in the early '80s — a pair of guitar slingers ready to save pop music from its slide into keyboard poseur purgatory — Austin had become America's city of musical salvation.

My second night out on 6th Street is a hot one and the bars have thrown open their windows and doors, so I can literally stand

in the street and listen to what's on offer: rock 'n' roll, jazz, funk, bluegrass, hip-hop, country and western, Texas blues.

One place is advertising "duelling pianos"; next door, two black guys in hooded sweatshirts are furiously working a pair of turntables as they trade rhymes in front of an enthusiastic hip-hop crowd.

Musicians may be the source of Austin's creative energy, but other artists are arriving in droves. Writers, painters and

film-makers lead the current wave, together with movie stars (Matthew McConaughey and Sandra Bullock among the most recognisable), looking for like-minded society away from the hedonism of LA.

No matter their profession or public profile, however, everyone is out of an evening, jogging, cycling or walking their dog beside the Colorado River which splits the city in two.

There is a cheerful simplicity about eating and drinking here,

too: happy hour is 4pm-7pm (cold beers and frozen margaritas), followed by a Tex-Mex dinner with endless varieties of burrito, taco and enchilada.

And, thanks to an arty student population, Austin is the best place in the US to shop for funky vintage clothing.

Down on 6th Street, the nights continue to unfold into a parade of astonishing performers.

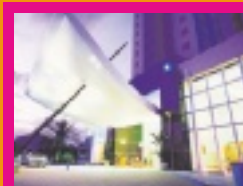
Baby-faced violin virtuoso Warren Hood seems to be everywhere — sitting in with a bluegrass group for an early set, then later the same night at the Continental Club, alongside torch-song chanteuse Toni Price.

Toni has packed them in at the Continental every Tuesday for 15 years, highball glass in hand as she and a devoted crowd get gently sozzled on booze and wistful emotion.

And just when I think I've experienced most of Austin's musical eccentricities, I stumble across The Small Stars in a beer-garden on Red River St, where the edgier bands tend to play.

Walking past, I spy what looks to be some kind of vaudeville extravaganza; one band member

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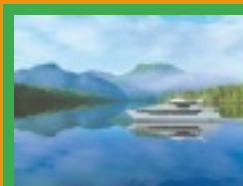
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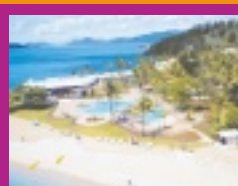
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