

## Bat City: Becoming with Bats in the Austin Music Scene

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*Abstract: In the 1990s, Bruno Latour contested the idea that modern societies are defined by their separation from the natural world. In this essay, I offer a case study from Austin, TX, examining how human-bat relationships have blurred the lines between the natural and the cultural in a process that I term “becoming with,” following Donna Haraway. I begin by discussing negative stereotypes about bats drawn from both colonial history and anti-immigrant narratives. I then explore the development of Austin into the “Bat City,” a process which radically revised these colonial preconceptions. Finally, I explore a musical case study that exemplifies Austin’s relationship to its local bat colony: horror-surf band the Bat City Surfers, who describe themselves as evolutionary descendants of bats.*

*Résumé : Dans les années 1990, Bruno Latour contestait l'idée selon laquelle les sociétés modernes se définissent par leur séparation du monde naturel. Dans cet article, je présente une étude de cas à Austin (Texas), en examinant la façon dont les relations entre êtres humains et chauves-souris ont brouillé les lignes de démarcation entre le naturel et le culturel au cours d'un processus que j'appelle « devenir-avec » (becoming with) à la suite de Donna Haraway. Je commence par exposer les stéréotypes négatifs au sujet des chauves-souris, issus tant de l'histoire coloniale que des récits anti-immigrants. J'analyse ensuite la transformation progressive d'Austin en « Bat City » (la ville des chauves-souris) au cours d'un processus qui a radicalement revu et corrigé ces idées reçues colonialistes. Enfin, je propose une étude de cas musicale qui illustre la relation d'Austin avec sa colonie locale de chauves-souris : le groupe horror-surf des Bat City Surfers, dont les membres se décrivent eux-mêmes comme le produit de l'évolution des chauves-souris, leurs descendants.*

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**I**n 1991, Bruno Latour claimed that modernity is not defined by separation from the natural world, thus destabilizing cultural anthropology’s rigid delineation between the natural and the cultural. In so doing, he established a precedent by which “hybrid” problems that fell somewhere between the realms of scientific inquiry and social or political studies could be examined.

His work led to an outpouring of research by authors such as Donna Haraway (2008), Anna Tsing (1995), John Hartigan (2015), and Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich (2010), who have been transformative in breaking down the neat divisions between “nature” and “culture” in ways that address the social construction of scientific thought as well as the discursive and material impacts of biology on cultural thinking and political policy.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay, I examine a case study that conforms to Latour’s notion of the cultural-scientific hybrid — the “nature-culture” as he describes it — of Austin, Texas (Latour 1993: 7). In particular, I focus on the relationship between human beings and Mexican Free-tail Bats (*Tadarida brasiliensis*) in the city’s music scene. While studies examining human beings’ aesthetic relationship to animals are far from new in anthropology or ethnomusicology — Steven Feld’s iconic *Sound and Sentiment* (1990 [1982]) being one of the earliest examples; Simonett and Seeger’s contributions to *Current Directions in Ecomusicology* (2016) are two more recent examples of a rather extensive body of literature on the topic — what I wish to emphasize by invoking Latour is that expressions of the so-called “natural” world in musical practice are not solely features of what have been dubbed “traditional” cultures. Rather, as Latour argues, we interact with the “natural” in the form of non-human animals in Western, urban, 21st-century environments daily, and they are not mere symbols: their presence affects and alters our cultural life, often in ways beyond our control. Furthermore, rather than devaluing multispecies interactions in the urban sphere as environmentalism’s emphasis on wilderness and conservation has done (Cronon 1996: 7), I argue for a new understanding of ecology as a process that does not seek to separate the human from the non-human, but rather evaluates and values interspecies interactions of all types, searching for ways that humans and non-humans can (and already do) productively coexist in a rapidly shrinking world.

The essay begins in Austin, TX in the early 1980s, and examines the arrival of what was to become the largest urban bat colony in the world. After delving into colonial and nativist narratives that form the basis for fears about bats, I briefly discuss the work of conservationists aimed at turning this narrative upside down — much as a bat might — particularly focusing on the use of photography. I then close with a musical case study of “horror surf” band Bat City Surfers, who describe themselves as evolutionary descendants of bats. I particularly focus on album artwork and elements of their live performances. Their acceptance of bats as identity markers and their subsequent imitation of them demonstrates not only the complete revision of cultural attitudes about bats in Austin, but also the complex interspecies web of the city’s music scene, which situates humans and bats as part of a connected ecosystem.

The close connection achieved between human beings and bats throughout this essay can be conceptualized, following Donna Haraway, as a process of “becoming with” (Haraway 2008: 15). Haraway argues that living entities do not exist prior to their interactions with others, but are created through processes of relationality, particularly focusing on the transfer of cellular information through touch between, for example, a human body and the bacteria that inhabits its digestive tract, its pets, its families, and the fungi, animals, protists, and plants in its immediate environment. This perpetual, co-constitutive becoming with other species breaks down “the culturally normal fantasy of human exceptionalism. . . . [Or] the premise that humanity alone is not a spatial and temporal web of interspecies dependence” (11). In other words, just as Austin’s close-knit relationship with its bat colony shows us that “we have never been modern,” similarly “we have never been human,” but are rather hybrid assemblages, human-dogs, human-fungi, cyborgs (Latour 1993: 46-47; Haraway 2008: 1).

Haraway’s work radically reconsiders not only our relationships with other species, but also the very nature of the self by focusing on the human body as a tactile interface with the surrounding world. However, by drawing on conventional physical understandings of the senses, Haraway’s theories can be extended to include sonic representations. In other words, just as the sciences conceive of light entering the eye as a form of tactility, sound waves are also material: a vibrating body compresses molecules in the air that travel across space to result in sympathetic vibrations in another body. Therefore, by reinstating what Veit Erlmann has called the “materiality of perception” we can understand both image-making and listening as constant processes of physical contact, and thus “becoming with” (Erlmann 2010: 17). In this way, not only are we in processes of becoming with the species we encounter through touch, we are also constantly made by and remaking other bodies through the production and reception of light and sound. We form assemblages not only with beings we directly encounter but also with those we *hear* and *see*.

In the case of Austin, the tactile relationships between humans and bats are sometimes visual, sometimes sonic, but always result in the kinds of “becoming with” theorized by Haraway. Because bats are difficult for humans to see or hear up close, bat-human relationships are almost always mediated by the use of technology. Therefore, in the case study that follows, the fact that “becoming with” bats occurs within the aesthetic realm of the city is not arbitrary, but is in fact necessary to the process. While close connections between humans and animals have traditionally been theorized as occurring solely in non-urban environments or in so-called “pre-modern” cultures, bat-human relationships in Austin are unequivocally a result of 20th- and 21st-century technological advancements. They thereby blur and destabilize the notion that the natural world is somehow separate from the urban present.

## Fear of a Bat Planet

The title of this section of my essay, taken from the Bat City Surfers' 2015 album, seeks not only to highlight Latour's emphasis on the interplay between cultural narratives and the so-called "natural" world, but also to offer a theoretical framework within which to retrospectively understand the history of Austin's relationship to its bats. The Bat City Surfers' album title plays with Public Enemy's 1990 album title *Fear of a Black Planet*, lauded not only as an exemplar of a golden age of hip hop, but also for its critical approach to race relations in the United States (Rand and Muerto, interview with author, April 6, 2017). While the title is more an example of the group's off-beat sense of humour than intentional political commentary, the substitution of "bat" for "black" nonetheless clearly articulates how the delineation of what "counts" as human is the basis not only for species divisions but also for the formulation of racialized and other culturally-oriented fears. In other words, the delineation between the human and the non-human has led not only to an artificial divide between nature and culture, but has also acted as the basis by which human groups have divided themselves from one another.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, understanding the biases implicit in extant cultural narratives about bats can also offer insight into the dynamics that exist between groups of people. By the same token, understanding non-human species' resistance to cultural narratives can lead to the revision of cultural perceptions which affect not only animals, but also people.

In the case of Austin, the Otherization of bats is central to understanding the city's coevolution with its bat colony. Initially, the city rejected the bat colony as "invaders," a process linked not only to colonial narratives dating back to the conquest of the Americas, but also to more contemporary concerns about immigration. Cultural negotiations by conservationists, government officials, and artists in the Austin area were so successful that they converted Austin into what is now known as "Bat City." This process began in the early 1980s, when the first large colony of Mexican Free-tailed Bats took root under the newly remodelled Congress Avenue Bridge. The then 70-year-old downtown bridge, which crosses the Colorado River, underwent reconstruction that included the addition of  $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch wide by 16-inch deep expansion joints (*Civil + Structural Engineer*, n.d.; Murphy 1990). Unbeknownst to the architects involved, the size of these joints was ideal for Mexican Free-tailed Bat roosting. Because the Congress Avenue Bridge colony is a maternity colony, the bats prefer tightly enclosed spaces like the expansion joints, which help to keep the hairless bat pups warm when they are born in early June.<sup>3</sup> The damming of the Colorado River in the 1930s and 1940s, in addition to rapid increases in human population, also



Fig. 1. Tourists gather to watch the nightly emergence of Mexican Free-tailed Bats from atop the Congress Avenue Bridge. Photo by author, 2014.



Fig. 2. Mexican Free-tailed Bats flying in front of the iconic Frost Tower in downtown Austin. Photo by author, 2017.

meant that bats had to find new roosting sites as their traditional habitat, caves, became less available. By 1984, hundreds of thousands of bats had colonized the bridge; there are an estimated 1.5 million when the colony reaches its annual peak, a number startlingly similar to the Austin area's 2 million human inhabitants.

The Austin public's initial panic and call for extermination is based not only in negative depictions of bats in popular media, but also in a longer history associated with the colonization of the Americas. In the early 1980s, Austin newspapers ran headlines such as "Bat colonies sink teeth into city" (Banta 1984) and "Mass Fear in the Air as Bats Invade Austin" (United Press International, 1984?). These images are drawn from invasion narratives common to horror films, which often depict bats as vicious, but are also perpetuated by pest control companies and disease prevention researchers seeking greater profits (Tuttle 2017a: 50, 2017b). Petitions were circulated to eradicate the colony and local officials declared a public health crisis, citing reports of a larger than usual number of citizens treated for potentially rabid bat bites in 1984 — despite the fact that rabid bat bites are extremely rare (Murphy 1990; Tuttle 2015: xi).<sup>4</sup>

Fear about bats, however, also has deeper roots in colonial fears of Otherness dating back to the European conquest of Central America and Mexico, evident in cultural associations between bats and vampires. According to Wasik and Murphy, the increased association between vampires and bats derives from colonial-era discourses about the supposed primitiveness of Central American peoples, in which depictions of half-human monsters expressed European anxieties about the native inhabitants of the Americas who were perceived to be backward, animalistic, and not quite human (2012: 71). These "monsters" are first described in accounts by Spanish colonist Hernán Cortés and his chronicler Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, who wrote of strange animals drinking the blood of horses and soldiers during their first night in Veracruz (Romero Sandoval 2013: 18). Having never encountered vampire bats prior to his arrival in the Americas (they are only found from Mexico to Argentina), Oviedo's accounts greatly exaggerated the dangers of bat bites, and included graphic descriptions of blood and disease. These stories made their way back to Europe and influenced existing vampire lore, which until that time had not been characterized by biting, sucking blood, nor shapeshifting into bats (Wasik and Murphy 2012: 86). Bat-vampire associations achieved widespread dissemination with Bram Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula* — interestingly, an anecdotal theory suggests that Stoker may have added bats to his story after reading Oviedo's accounts of bats in Mexico (Medellín, interview with author, September 4, 2017).

While, by the 1980s, most vampire stories had been purged of Central American associations, fears of Otherness remained present not only in pop culture descriptions of bats, but also in the form of anti-immigration anxieties. Similar cases in which “invasive” species have been described within the framework of nativist politics have been discussed by such authors as John Hartigan (2015), Jean and John Comaroff (2001), Hugh Raffles (2011), and Anna Tsing (1995). Helmreich (2009) also goes into great detail about the use of the term “alien” in describing invasive species — a term that has also notably been used by proponents of strict immigration policies (Mehan 1997: 258).

In a state like Texas, known for its tenuous relationship with the Mexican border and historically strained relationships with Mexicans themselves (Paredes 1958: 15, among many others), fears about invading Others are never far from residents’ minds. Since immigration reform became a major topic in US politics of the early 1980s,<sup>5</sup> it is perhaps more than a coincidence that widespread panic occurred on the arrival of the Congress Avenue Bridge colony, which happened at the same time (Manchaca 2011: 281). Just as in the case described above, the heightened concerns over illegal immigration in Texas may have been the subconscious origin of Austin’s initial panic regarding its “invading” bat colony. Though Mexican Free-tailed Bats are not truly “immigrants,” having migrated seasonally to and from Texas for what is believed to be thousands of years, the discourses surrounding the initial arrival of the Congress Avenue Bridge colony reflect fears of invasion rooted in political concern over the rise in illegal immigration at the time. Therefore, while Austin residents may not have recognized or consciously considered the relationship between the Free-tail colony’s twice annual migration across the Mexican border and rising concerns about human immigration, the similarity in the discourses used to describe them both emphasizes that Otherizing processes are founded on delineating what counts as “human” and what doesn’t.

Anna Tsing’s case study is particularly relevant because it demonstrates the lack of specificity that results from the Otherizing processes of invasion narratives. Her article examines the imposition of racial stereotypes in discourses about so-called Africanized or “killer” bees, which were then retrofitted to pre-existing anti-immigration narratives of the time (1995: 129). The allegedly hyper-aggressive “African” bees in Tsing’s case study resulted in such drastic actions as the US Department of Agriculture’s construction of a barrier across the Texas-Mexico border to prevent bees from entering the United States, which Tsing describes as a combination of “fears of Mexican immigrants creeping over inadequately patrolled borders and fears of Black-White racial miscegenation” (1995: 134). On one hand, the stereotypes imposed on the bees were related to prejudices about Africans and Afro-descendants, but at the same time, they



Fig. 3. Album artwork for *Fear of a Bat Planet* (2015) drawn by Joey Muerto.

were characterized as invading Others, reflecting concerns about immigration from Latin America.

Austin musicians of the 1980s noted and capitalized on these exaggerated fears and their relationship to Otherization, most notably, glam rock band The Bats. In particular, front man Bevis Griffin, the self-proclaimed “Black Rock Maverick of Texas,” used bats to comment on his own experiences with discrimination as an African-American glam rock performer in a scene he describes as a place of “literal cultural schism”<sup>6</sup> in which “you could literally get harassed for just having long hair if you are Caucasian. If you are a black musician, it’s times ten” (Griffin, interview with author, March 26, 2017). When Griffin came up with the name The Bats, he sought to draw attention to this Otherizing by acting as an exaggerated version of the fears that were projected onto him by members of the Austin public. He chose the name “The Bats” because he had heard that his musical idol, Jimi Hendrix, was sometimes referred to by his side musicians as “the bat” since he often slept by day. He had also read a passage in a book where the term “bat” was used as a racial slur towards African-Americans (Griffin interview with author, March 26, 2017). For Griffin, the fear associated with bats as represented in horror films demonstrated the kinds of irrational fears directed towards musicians at the time, and particularly towards himself as a black glam rock musician, which was a complete anomaly in the scene. As a member of The Bats, he drew on these cultural associations by utilizing horror tropes in his performances. He had also hoped to eventually build a bat-shaped stage on which to perform. For Griffin, bats exemplified the fears — racialized, interspecies, musical — that pervaded Austin in the 1980s.

Returning to the present, these dynamics are clearly articulated in the album artwork for *Fear of a Bat Planet*, illustrated by band member Joey Muerto.

Drawn in comic book style, the album cover depicts a giant bat terrorizing a city, simultaneously clawing through a building, squeezing a person to death, stepping on both a person and a car, and vaporizing another person with a green ray (Fig. 3). The city appears panicked, as a group of (notably white) women run, lament, and attempt to retaliate against the giant monster. The excess of the image seems to make the fears articulated above ridiculous, moving them out of the realm of real-life colonialism and into the world of fantasy through the process of artistic negotiation.

### Becoming the Bat City

Austin's coevolution with its bat colony was slow, largely instigated by the work of conservation biologist Merlin Tuttle and his then-fledgling organization, Bat Conservation International. Tuttle's strong emphasis on education and his work with local media, community organizers, and schools sought to bring together human beings and bats, which were normally inaccessible due to their nocturnal nature. Most notably, he employed what he termed "ambassador bats," or domesticated fruit bats to show the public that their negative preconceptions were unfounded.

Additionally, Tuttle is lauded for his innovative approach to photography, which offered some of the first images of bats in which the animals did not appear to be tense or aggressive. As Michael Taussig discusses (following Walter Benjamin), the mechanical reproduction of images through photography is a form of tactility that not only articulates relationships of alterity, but creates new entities by redefining subject-object relationships (1993: 24). Notwithstanding complex theories about the image itself, Tuttle redefined those relationships by taking the time to get to know bat behaviours before photographing them, much as anthropologists are now expected to do field work to try to understand the cultures that interest them before depicting them in visual, sonic, or written media. Therefore, the mimetic practice of taking pictures was deeply related to the structures of power that existed between bat and human, not only in the act of image-making itself, but also in the process that underlies the images.

Tuttle's campaign was largely successful, as evidenced by the fact that the bat colony's nightly emergences have now become a popular tourist event. It draws both locals and visitors from around the world and is listed as a "top experience" on travel websites such as Lonely Planet ([lonelyplanet.com](http://lonelyplanet.com)) and TripAdvisor ([tripadvisor.com](http://tripadvisor.com)). In fact, it took Tuttle only four years of campaigning for Mayor Lee Cooke to declare Austin as "the bat capital of America" (Tuttle 2015: x). The bats themselves have also benefitted from the

tourist boom, as it means they are protected from eradication attempts. Even pest control companies in Austin now practice safe bat removal techniques, which involve exclusion from certain human-inhabited spaces, rather than elimination by poison.

Mexican Free-tailed Bats now generate an estimated \$12 million annual income for the city of Austin through ecotourism; they are featured in items ranging from posters for local rideshare companies to purchasable souvenirs, bat statues, and music venues such as the 6th Street Bat Bar (Tuttle 2015: xi). The official drink of Austin, determined in an annual competition as part of the city's summer Bat Fest, is the "batini" (Smith, telephone interview with author, June 19, 2017; Sayre 2015; Alarcón 2006). Additional examples of Austin's bat fervour include: businesses such as Bat City Bartending; Bat City Awards; celebrations in honour of National Bat Day; the mascot of Austin's former hockey team the "Ice Bats"; and Austin Community College's mascot, the "Riverbats" (Kimble, n.d.; Eventbrite, n.d.; Bat City Awards & Apparel, n.d.; Cohen 2001; Austin Community College, n.d.).

The association between bats and music is particularly important, however, because it links Austin's two most popular nicknames: "Bat City" and the "Live Music Capital of the World." Both these nicknames emerged in the early 1980s during a time when policy shifts geared towards increasing tourism were being enacted by local government. As Barry Shank describes in *Dissonant Identities* (2011), following a period of economic growth that peaked in 1984 — the same year the Congress Avenue Bridge colony reached its peak size — the Austin Chamber of Commerce turned its eye to promoting Austin as a friendly city. The Texas Music Association, working in conjunction with the Chamber of Commerce, started a major campaign to increase the presence of the professional music industry in Austin, marketing it as a key element that defines what "makes Austin special" (Shank 2011: 197, 199, 200). The success of the television program *Austin City Limits* was key in marketing this element of Austin identity to the broader public. The fact that both Austin's identity as a music city and its identity as a bat city emerged precisely when Austin became a popular tourist destination means that they became conflated.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that this recourse to the natural has a long history in the Austin Music Scene. In particular, Travis Stimeling points out that the progressive country scene of the 1970s utilized natural and pastoral imagery to articulate a sense of both local identity and geographic distance from the mainstream music industry located in urban areas like New York City (2011: 9). This pastoralism was linked to the nostalgia of the "back to the land" movement, which sought to combat the pressures of modern development by a return to nature.

However, as Latour notes, the idea that there could be a modernity disconnected from the natural world is a fallacy, and the same is true for Austin's construction of a type of authenticity predicated on a return to the natural. As Stimeling points out, the rise in Austin's status as an alternative mecca also coincided with the arrival of major companies like Texas Instruments, IBM, and Samsung, which contributed to the massive population and economic growth that the city continues to experience in the present day (2011: 9). The simultaneous development of a mainstream culture and its counterculture locked them into a relationship of co-dependence that has become increasingly visible as the city has aged. It is perhaps no accident, then, that the bats at the Congress Avenue Bridge — which quite literally links the urban development of downtown with the countercultural South of the city — have come to represent Austin in its current manifestation.

Bats are not the first animal species to be marketed as symbols of Austin's alternative identity. Most notably, the nine-banded armadillo (*Dasyops novemcinctus*) was the mascot of the Armadillo World Headquarters in South Austin, famous for its role in the progressive country scene of the 1970s. The venue drew its name from the ubiquitous mammal with “ears like those of a rhinoceros, a tail like that of an opossum, a proboscis somewhat like that of an anteater, and a hard, protective shell around its vitals that scrapes against rocks as it waddles along” (Reid 2004: 64), known around Texas for their “total disregard for automobiles” (Patoski 2015: 8). While on one hand the animal's “armoured” body plan paralleled the building's history as an armoury, its reputation as a pest species also appealed to the founders' perception of their venue's location in South Austin, the source of the city's countercultural movement. Interestingly, while armadillos do not undertake seasonal migrations as bats do, the gradual movement of their populations north into the United States from Mexico in the 19th century also marks them as “border crossers” in a certain sense.

The rise of the armadillo as a representation of Austin counterculture is largely indebted to Jim Franklin, who was to join Eddie Wilson and Mike Tolleson as one of the founders of the Armadillo World Headquarters, though cartoonist Glenn Whitehead had previously used the armadillo in the university satire publication, *The Ranger*. Franklin was already known for his “fetish” for depicting armadillos on posters at the time of the venue's formation (Patoski 2015: 7-8). His first poster, created for a benefit at Woodridge Park in 1968, featured an armadillo smoking a joint and was geared towards aiding those in the local music scene who had been incarcerated for drugs (Patoski 2015: 8). It became a symbol of the Austin underground because it “embod[ied] the plight of the Texas hippies — reclusive, unwanted, scorned” (Reid 2004: 64). The response of UT Board of Regents head Frank Erwin, widely despised by

the hippie community, to these images as a symbol of a “leftist plot or cult” further spurred the proliferation of armadillo imagery (Wilson and Sublett 2017: 7). Franklin also acted as master of ceremonies at the Armadillo World Headquarters, which involved wearing an armadillo mask along with a five-foot cowboy hat and Planters Peanut suit, thus establishing the armadillo as an element of the counterculture’s performative identity in a more literal sense (Reid 2004: 62).

Franklin’s images and the music created at the Armadillo World Headquarters serve as points of contact between the human and non-human animal worlds, contact predicated on aesthetic representation, and therefore a kind of “becoming with” as discussed by Haraway. By reproducing images of the armadillo, members of the Austin Music Scene negotiated their relationship to the natural world, seeking to know their place within it through the act of image-making.

However, sonic forms of representation were even more suited to this type of negotiation in the music scene, and thus, bats were an even more suitable point of negotiation than armadillos due to their associations with sound. Of the many currently existing bat-themed musical groups (The Bat City Rhythm, The Bat City Six, The Bat City Bombshells, Echo and the Bats, to name a few), many cite not only bats’ close association with Austin as a motivation for their band name and aesthetic, but also bats’ propensity for echolocation. Kathleen Houlihan, of the all-librarian, youth literacy-oriented band Echo and the Bats, described it in the following way:

The bat is sort of the unofficial mascot of the city of Austin. Austinites feel really protective and passionate about and love their bats. And it’s a weird thing to have as a mascot, so it embodies all of those wonderful things, it’s a little edgy and a little kooky. There are also elements of it in a band, sound and participatory songs.  
(interview with author, March 24, 2017)

Echo and the Bats seek to literally embody bats in their performances by not only dressing up as them, but also by including call and response elements in their songs, which they conceptualize as similar to echolocation. This seeks to literally embody the relationship between bats and rock music as markers of Austin identity.

However, just as the Armadillo World Headquarters largely drew its symbols from visual art, Austin now abounds in images that literally depict bats in musical performance. Some of these images merely show bats and musical symbols together, such as the mural on South Congress Avenue

depicting a cloud of bats surrounding the statue of music icon Stevie Ray Vaughn, or bats flying around Santa Claus on the program for the annual Holiday Sing Along and Downtown Stroll. Others more literally depict bats as musical performers, such as the logo used for radio station KMFA's "Listen Local" series, which shows a bat wearing headphones, or a cardboard cut-out at the downtown Trader Joe's Grocery, which allows shoppers to assume the dual identity of musician and bat by placing their face in the frame of a cardboard cut-out of a bat wearing cowboy boots and playing a guitar.

However, the relationship between bats and music in Austin is more than just symbolic. Each year, the city holds its annual Bat Fest on the Congress Avenue Bridge, combining the spectacle of the Free-tail colony's nightly emergence with musical acts and vendors. Now in its 14th year, the festival has gradually shifted its focus to strongly emphasize music, though initially Bat Conservation International was deeply involved in the production of the event, including setting up an information booth and receiving a portion of the proceeds from ticket sales (Smith, telephone interview with author, June 19, 2017).<sup>7</sup> Though a few vendors feature bat-related products and there is still a bat costume contest, for the most part, the festival is focused around musical performances at stages on the Congress Avenue Bridge, which stop in time for the nightly emergence of the bats.

What is striking about Bat Fest is that the combination of the music festival and the nightly emergence of the Mexican Free-tailed Bats serves to transform the latter into a performance event. Though the bats can be seen on almost any night of the summer from many locations in the south of the city, the festival involves blocking off the entire Congress Avenue Bridge, including a designated "viewing area" on the south side near the parking lot of the Austin American-Statesman.<sup>8</sup> Festival visitors must purchase tickets in order to access these locations, which on any other night would be accessible free of charge. In fact, according to the event's promoter, French Smith, the central idea of the festival has to do with the location, not so much the bats themselves (Smith, telephone interview with author, June 19, 2017). However, he amends this statement by pointing out that at the time of the festival's initial creation, viewing the bat emergence was not as popular a tourist event as it is now, thereby promoting it as part of the music festival was seen as a way of engaging with the emergence. Whether the festival helped to promote the popularity of viewing the nightly feeding emergence is debatable; however, the large number of participants in the 2017 festival speaks to the effectiveness of the event's promotion.

## Bat City Surfers

The extent to which Austinites have internalized both music and bats as markers of identity is exemplified by “horror surf” band Bat City Surfers, who not only use bat imagery in their performances, but whose very brand carefully demarcates their relationship to Austin as a city. They chose their moniker for its straightforward description of their style and locality, which has unintentionally led them to be frequent ambassadors for the Congress Avenue Bridge bat colony, answering questions for curious tourists. They also find that their merchandise sells because of their depiction of iconic buildings, such as the Frost Tower, the Texas State capitol, and the UT Tower. However, rather than merely being of geographical interest, the Bat City Surfers use bats to symbolically reject both Texas conservatism and the national music mainstream in a manner similar to that of the Armadillo World Headquarters.

The horror aesthetic is more than just a costume or a cartoon: the Bat City Surfers have developed a mythology to explain their origins as the descendants of bats. As their website states, “We come from a world where man-kind evolved from bats and, after joining forces to create the ultimate surf-punk experience, we accidentally transported ourselves into this dimension during a recording experiment gone horribly wrong!” (Bat City Surfers, n.d.). The close biological alignment with bats constructed by this mythology suggests not only a deep internalization of Austin’s relationship with its bridge bats, but also a sense of identity as formulated through inter-species relationships. Therefore, bats are not adopted as mere symbols but are acknowledged, however humorously, as contributors to the formation of the group’s ethos in its present form.

Because surf music is characterized by a lack of vocals (in contrast to the so-called “surf pop” of the Beach Boys), the Bat City Surfers rely on visual and sonic references to convey their relationship to bats, rather than lyrics. Drawing from the likes of surf guitar legend Dick Dale but infusing their musical style with grungier, thrashier sounds more akin to metal or punk, Bat City Surfers utilize an aesthetic drawn from horror tropes. Sometimes these references are overt, including screening classic horror films while they perform, or excerpting audio from public domain horror films on their recorded albums (Magenheimer 2016). Visually, they wear fake blood as a “gimmick” to differentiate themselves from other surf bands, and wear bat hats, Batman belt buckles, and other symbolic representations of bats that link them to the city’s countercultural identity.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps most notable of these images is the band’s logo, which shows three iconic Austin buildings (the Frost Tower, the UT Tower, and the state capitol) over two giant bat wings. However, unlike similar images from other bands or

media that show bats and the city as separate entities, the Bat City Surfers logo appears as if the buildings are substituting for the bat's head, creating a techno-hybrid bat city. The all-encompassing hybridity (or perhaps coltishness) implied by the image is echoed in the group's oft-spoken mantra following their title song in performances: "We are all bat city surfers."

The group's sound can also be read as linked to their self-identification as bat descendants. While reverb is generally considered a key characteristic of surf music, used to evoke a "wet" sound arguably relating to the experience of "catching a wave" (Rand and Muerto, interview with author, April 6, 2017; Cooley 2014: 52), it is also used as a way of evoking spatiality, something that has been discussed by authors such as Peter Doyle (2005: 7). In the case of the Bat City Surfers, the spatiality implied by the use of reverb and other echoic electronic effects can be seen as imitating the process of echolocation, further emphasizing their identification with bats. They also utilize octave-shifting effects which, though not immediately obvious to the listener, are reminiscent of tools known as "bat detectors," devices that scientists use to pitch shift echolocation calls into the audible hearing range of humans.

Blurring the lines between truth and (science) fiction allows the Bat City Surfers to align themselves genetically on a continuum with Chiropteran



Fig. 4. Bat City Surfers logo.

species. This genetic relationship is articulated through the use of technology in both visual and sonic image-making that results in a kind of “becoming with” bats as conceptualized by Haraway. In the act of image-making, the Bat City Surfers more literally adopt bat-like personality elements themselves — thus subverting the relationship of symbol and signifier, emphasizing the complete integration of both bat and human species in the formulation of their identity, and negotiating a place in a complex natural-cultural world.

## Conclusions

The Congress Avenue Bridge colony has become, for many, synonymous with Austin’s identity as a city. The process by which this has occurred is complex, involving both human and non-human actors. It has resulted in major revisions to cultural narratives surrounding bats themselves, but also to the ways in which Austinites negotiate their relationship to the natural world through music. The examples discussed in this essay are only a small sampling of the types of bat-related artistic production currently occurring in Austin, but they are also some of those that most thoughtfully consider human-bat relationships.

The story of Austin’s bridge bats is important not only because it helps us to reconsider the relationships between humans and non-human species but also because it helps us to recognize that these relationships are present in all kinds of environments, not simply those considered “traditional” or “indigenous,” as early writings by Steven Feld or studies in ecomusicology might tend to suggest. In fact, the presence of non-human species in the Austin area has been crucial to its identity as an urban, 21st-century city. Such interspecies ties not only clarify and help establish its locality, but also articulate a form of alterity in the face of the globalizing present. As Latour pointed out in the early 1990s, the fluid relationship between nature and culture is a feature of the antimodern present throughout the world. While we might characterize modern, urban environments as lacking the influence of the “natural” world, we really “have never been modern,” but remain deeply connected parts of the ecosystems that surround us (Latour 1993: 46-47).

Most importantly, in the case of Austin, these complex negotiations are drawn from processes of “becoming with” that result from mimetic representations of bats in visual and sonic media. Thus, the relationship between Austin’s music scene and bats is not arbitrary, but is in fact necessary for understanding how human beings and non-human animals are situated within complex nature-cultural ecosystems. It is through aesthetic practices that these relationships are negotiated, defined, and revised. 🌿

## Notes

1. Recent years have seen a rise in interest in the question of animals and music, particularly, and perhaps surprisingly, among music scholars. On one hand, proponents of biomusicology (a term coined by Nils L. Wallin in 1991) have sought the origins of human aesthetic practices using techniques derived from evolutionary biology, while zoömusicologists (a branch of zoösemiotics) have applied techniques from the early years of ethnomusicology to animal sounds in an attempt to understand them culturally (e.g., Martinelli 2009). These approaches, while not without some problems, are valiant attempts at interdisciplinary exploration; however, for the purposes of this essay, I draw more directly from science and technology studies.

2. Ochoa Gautier (2014) has delved into this issue with great clarity and sophistication.

3. The Congress Avenue Bridge has become such a successful bat habitat that the Texas Department of Transportation initiated a program to design similar structures around the state to provide habitat in other urban environments.

4. Though bats can contract rabies and pass it to humans, the notion that they are asymptomatic carriers of the disease is incorrect. Only about one in a thousand bats contract rabies (approximately the same rate as other animals) and those that do seldom become aggressive enough to attack another animal, simply dying instead. Between 1997 and 2006, there were only 17 reported cases of humans contracting rabies from bats in the United States, and there has never been a documented case of someone contracting rabies from the bat colony under the Congress Avenue Bridge. In fact, early studies that suggested that bats carried rabies without showing symptoms may have in fact been pointing to the Rio Bravo virus, which affects neither humans nor bats, but does affect mice — who were the test organisms used in the study.

While no one other than a trained professional should handle wild bats, the fear generated by misinformation campaigns (often perpetuated by extermination companies and news organizations) are far more dangerous than the bats themselves, as they often lead to panic situations in which people try to eradicate bats from their homes or cities. These panic situations lead to drastic increases in bat bites simply because the terrified bat colony is trying to find a way to escape. See, for example, Vogel (2014); Bacardi Imports brochure, “The most famous bat in the world,” (1984); Tuttle (1988); The Center for Disease Control, “Learning about bats and rabies” (2011).

5. The United States held some of its most stringent anti-immigration policies from the mid-1960s until the late 1970s. As Manchaca discusses, policy shifts in the 1980s, culminating in the Immigration Reform and Control Act in 1986 by President Reagan, were largely motivated by depleted labour forces and concerns over U.S. security, rather than by altruism (2011: 277).

6. It is worth noting that Griffin performed at the Armadillo World Headquarters with a previous group, the Skyscrapers, so he is relevant not only for his relationship to bats but also for his involvement in the aforementioned “armadillo scene.”

7. When Merlin Tuttle retired from BCI in 2008, the organization became less involved with Bat Fest. In recent years, they have also shifted focus away from educational projects and have begun to emphasize research. The Bat Loco Bash, held in San Antonio each year, still includes BCI involvement, perhaps because of the close proximity of Bracken Cave, a BCI-owned property that houses the world's largest colony of Mexican Free-tailed Bats (roughly 15 million at its peak). In 2017, the Bat Loco Bash included a bat costume contest, visits from the “Bat Man of San Antonio” and the batmobile used in the 1960s Batman television series starring Adam West, and bat-themed activities for kids, including a “bat dance” that symbolically re-enacted echolocation.

8. Incidentally, the viewing area offers a somewhat obstructed view of the emergence, which begs the question as to what politics were involved in its designation as such.

9. The band members all use stage names humorously derived from horror or science fiction tropes, each with his own backstory: lead guitarist Omega Rand is “a man out of time; hailing from a bleak, distant future ruled by machines”; rhythm guitarist Joey Muerto is “the only dead man with insomnia”; bass guitarist Vampire-Hunter Hunter is “the legendary slayer of all vampire killers”; and drummer Korn Rolla is “descended from a long line of ancient, tentacled sea beasts” (Bat City Surfers, <http://rer623.wixsite.com/batcitysurfers/biography-of-bat-city-surfers>).

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