

15SHORT.DOC

Two years ago, a friend and I took a season's membership in the Austin Symphony. For a princely sum we were issued tickets so high in the balcony, the huge stage of the Bass Center looked like an architect's conception for an orchestra shell.

Five of my eight children live in Austin, so music wasn't the only incentive. The Capitol city is a special place, being the site of a university rich enough to provide a lot of entertainment and museums. Good food and used book stores and civic theaters abound around the area. However, my introduction to the cultural aspects of the city took years of a slow-acting osmosis. A sort of a bank shot instead of taking direct aim at the pocket, is the way we called it at the pool hall in Mertzon.

For a long time on Austin trips, I always went dancing at a honky tonk on South Lamar called "The Broken Spoke." The "broken" part was most appropriate. The tin shack of a building was so ancient, zoning laws and fire codes were enforceable. In the men's room, customers had to hold up part of the ceiling; ladies, I suspect, fared little better. But the big thing about the Broken Spoke were the nights a western band played such great dance music.

The band leader, a fiddler named Alvin Crow, was once the youngest violinist in the Tulsa Symphony Orchestra. So after awhile, Alvin's playing must have attuned my ear to the string section of the symphony orchestra down at Bass

Center, leading me down to the more refined climes of a concert.

Appreciate, the change was difficult. Takes time to learn to say, "Rachmaninov's Concerto Number Two," instead of "Rachmaninov's deuce." Practice is necessary to stop calling to start sipping hot tea instead of drinking coffee, but I caught on fast that it was bad manners to use the string on the tea bag for dental floss. The dress code was much different, too. The trouble with dressing up at "The Spoke" is every time a diesel truck passes by out front, the vibration of the tin roof shakes chalk dust from the sheetrock ceilings, making blue serge suits or plum-colored dresses look like they were coated in confectionery sugar.

Some mighty fine folks go to both places. The symphony crowd holds an edge on evening clothes, nevertheless, the costumes at the Broken Spoke preserve the state's western image. Before my spectacular rise in society, I remember noticing how girls' blue jeans shrunk so tight-fitting at the Central Texas dance halls. However, after I moved up town, I doubt if I noticed over twice in an evening how many ladies wore split-skirted evening gowns that expose so much of the hind leg, if not a bit of the hindquarter.

Out of town visitors need a short adjustment to Austin's fashions. University students work all over the place. Students today at secondary and college levels wear nose and tongue bobs of gold and use hair dyes and skin tattoos to a high tint. Burnt orange and flaming green begin

the most popular hair colors. Shaved into a droopy mohawk, it's hard to imagine anything short of an orangutan having worse style.

They (the kids, not the apes) also mount gold nugget looking things in their navels. Hard to imagine how the old grannies are going to look sitting out on the porch of nursing homes 70 years from now. May be a big comfort to have part of your past recorded under your skin, like: "Harry loves Meme," or "Roll me in your clover you big old garden of love."

Just last month I reread Conrad's novel, "Heart of Darkness," published in 1898 about the Belgian Congo. In this novel of colonial disgrace on the big river, he writes of the Europeans having a "Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs." Most likely the society meant to abolish everyone's customs except theirs by hitting the natives over the head with billy clubs, until they stopped wearing bones in their noses and hanging ornaments from their earlobes.

Now that I circulate in crowds wearing white pearls from oyster beds and pure ivory cuff links set from the tusks of wild beasts of Africa, I favor a society to suppress the savages and yearn to ventilate the dance halls on Saturday night to refresh the environment of evaporating perspiration from over-exuberant two-steppers.

On lonely nights on the prairie, however, western music drowns out the classic station. Hard to forget, Alvin

touching his bow to "The Girls All Look Prettier at Closing  
Time."