

Austin Post

CITY NEWS



KEEP AUSTIN PRICKLY: NEW BOOK RECOUNTS THE FIGHT TO SAVE THE CACTUS CAFE

BY **ROB PRELIASCO**, 4 weeks ago [✉ Contact](#)

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UT's venerable music venue the Cactus Café is celebrating its 35th anniversary this year, but it's a celebration that nearly didn't happen. It took a grassroots movement in 2010 to save the club from closing.

Local author Michael Scully has chronicled that fight with a self-published e-bemook called *Cactus Burning*. It tells the story of the fight to save the Cactus and also contains lessons for other movements looking to save local culture, in Austin and beyond.

Scully, who moved to Austin in 1995, said he has not seen anything like the 2010 Cactus fight either before or since.

"I thought that what happened here with regard to this community movement

growing up to save a community icon was just incredible.” he said.

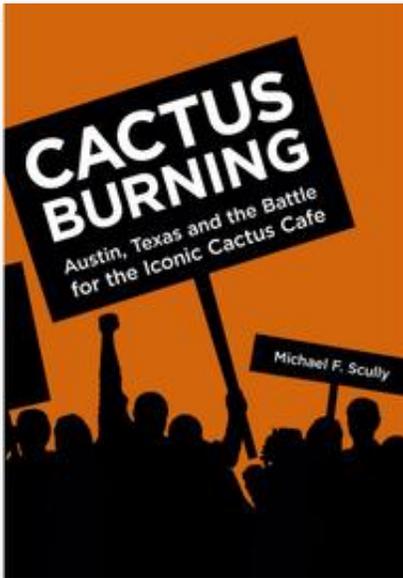


Author Michael Scully

The Cactus Café opened in 1979 and has been known ever since for hosting quality local, national, and international acts. It was something of a career stepping-stone for performers like Lucinda Williams, Townes Van Zandt, Lyle Lovett, Hayes Carll, and others.

“I’ve loved the Cactus since the first show that I attended [there,]” Scully said. “I love the ambience and the way acoustic music can fill that room with a big sound.”

Despite its importance in the history of Austin’s music scene, The Cactus Café isn’t on South Congress, Red River, or Sixth Street. It’s inside the Union Building on the UT Austin Campus and was operated by the university until 2010.



In January, 2010, UT put out a press release abruptly announcing the closing of the venue as a cost-cutting move, drawing the ire of a large number of Austinites. Thousands of people organized benefits and protests and complained to the university as the proposed closing became a national news story.

“[The closing] was a very secretive deal,” Scully said. “It was announced at sundown on a winter Friday.” In protesting the decision, Austinites showed “a love of the arts and of what makes Austin special,” he said.

Scully’s book chronicles this fight in detail, from the initial announcement through protests by students and other Austinites to the university’s PR battle to the compromise that saw the club come under the management of KUT, the university’s public radio station.

Scully thinks there’s a greater message in this relatively small story. “I really hope that ... people who want to save anything in their own communities can take a look at the model that Austin followed,” Scully said.

There’s a message for Austinites, too, beyond the slice of their own recent

history. Scully thinks that something like the Cactus fight is bound to happen in Austin again given the pace of change in the city. Popular businesses are being forced to relocate or are getting hemmed in by expensive redevelopment, and he thinks people will stand up for them. “It’s about valuing local treasures in a world that’s becoming Wal-Marted,” he said.



UT Austin students protest the proposed Cactus closure in 2010.

Credit: Niyantha Shekar

Scully is the author of one prior book: *The Never-ending Revival: Rounder Records and the Folk Alliance*, published by University of Illinois Press in 2008. He holds a Ph.D in American Studies from UT and said he has had a lifelong interest in the way that cultures use music.

Cactus Burning was published on April 22 as an eBook available through Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and iTunes for \$6.99.



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