

Jason Eskenazi and The Rodeo City  
By  
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“Did they feed you?” these were the words I used to greet my old amigo as he concluded palm pressing and mild flirting at the tail end of his lecture to the journalism students at the University of Texas. I knew these would be the most thoughtful and warming words to a pensive Jewish New York City photographer who despises public speaking. “They gave me lunch,” he said softly. It was 7:30 and time to welcome my friend to Texas with steak fajitas, marinated in cervesa.

I met Jason Eskenazi in upstate New York last summer at the Blue Mountain Center for the Arts and Humanities, an institution owned and operated by the brains behind Mother Jones magazine. I was there working on an apocalyptic adaptation of Chekhov’s Uncle Vanya. Jason was attending to make photo prints chronicling his adventures in Russia during the ‘90’s. Outside of making art “happen” we drank low-grade rum, played copious amounts of poker, and partook in several games of Kennedy-esque American football, one match finishing with a sprained finger on my left hand. Although Eskenazi is 15 years my senior, he can behave like an unassuming frat boy who puts the passed-out to bed. He can drink for either distance or speed, and wolf down platters of pork ribs, or oysters with skill and grace. Often shy, but never afraid, Eskenazi has no time or room in his life to be kosher. He is epicurean, and walks this world to experience it. Jason is always ready for a good time. On his first night in Texas, we hit a quaint Mexican patio for those fajitas and pints of Shiner Bock, then, I told him, “I’m taking you to the San Antonio Rodeo.”

He smiled and said “Sounds good.”

Now, in the past Eskenazi and I had discussed working on some esoteric pop culture Americana project together, I nicknamed this endeavor “4 Corners to Nowhere.” This idea involved the two of us narrating a trip across our country starting in Portland, Maine, traveling to Key West, then to San Diego, onto Seattle, and ending the trip back in New England. On our travels, Jason could capture the sights with his lens, and I would pen the story of every lad and lass we would come across, each recipe we would unearth, and all the local brews we could sip from, searching for a hidden and mystifying America; me getting tattoos of each spot we would visit along the way. We would be two cowboys, riding my lunar mist Japanese pick-up truck to an enlightened understanding of these continental United States, with, hopefully, a sweet book deal at the end of our highway. Sadly, such an adventure would require a large bag of money, something neither of us are renowned for obtaining. Thus, our great American adventure would have to be the San Antonio Stock Show and Rodeo.

Rodeo is a uniquely Texan happening, and I have absolutely no clue why we don’t rodeo 365 days a year. Fried food, petting zoos, and twisted carnival rides that stretched into the sky was just the tip of the iceberg. There was a Cowboy Church with Ron Corzine, T-

bone and the Longhorn Puppet Show, the Old Tyme Medicine Show, and the Swift Swine Pig Race featured Dozer, who could comfortably best any of the Animal Farm gang in a 40-yard dash. On way to the Snake Show, featuring rattlers, corrals, and copperheads, we met a cowboy ventriloquist who commented on the cold gray weather. The rodeo was a contained city, guarded with gates, complete with its own police and medical team. It was all as if Dell Shannon had a calm nightmare.

But people don't come to the rodeo for puppets and vipers. They come for live country music and bull riding. Inside the AT&T Center, where the splendid Spurs basketball team shoots and scores, was the heart of rodeo city. We had tickets to see Josh Turner, a Brad Pitt look-a-like with a deep country baritone I, nor Jason, had never heard of. Turner entered the scene in a cherry red GMC, and took the stage, a rotating cylinder placed in the middle of mud and dirt before the music. He started with cool and lengthy songs that gradually became more aggressive and slowly drew the audience in. It didn't matter we had never heard of Turner (for my money a country singer should be named Johnny, Willie, or Merrill) everyone else in the audience had. Teenage girls screamed the young singer's name as if he were a Beatle, and when he left the stage, the ladies were speechless, mothers and daughters gasping for air.

After the concert we went to the Auction Barn, the Horse Barn, the Cattle Barn, and the Swine Barn to watch the animals paraded by children on cell phones. My favorite was a contest amongst boarder collies herding sheep. The dogs were methodical and problem-solving and I rooted for each to win. I could've stayed all night, but Jason wanted to hit Driftwood for brisket and ribs and we weren't going to eat bar-b-q in front of the animals. There were no tattoos to be had, but on our first adventure into the heart of Americana, I had no grand realization, no great insight to the American way of life. Rodeo is a city, a place with freaks, and family, and teen idols. A place with beer, and biblical bastards, racing pigs and cowboy puppets and we had a fine time. I can't wait to go again next year.

That night we got our food and laid around my apartment watching King Of The Hill and drinking cold shots of Tito's vodka. We didn't play poker and we didn't play football, but none of that mattered. It was nice to see my old amigo on my new turf and show him a good time. The next day, on the way to the airport, Jason murmured, "I'll miss this place." I invited him back, anytime he wished. "Sounds good", he said softly.