

# Be Here Now: --- The Wild Night Sky

Field Notes from Magical Marfa

*By Amy Lynch*





Photo: Amy Lynch

## It's Friday night in far west Texas,

and the electronic wonders museum is empty. Not because it's closed, but because the gentleman running the show – its curator? – has joined his regulars out front to watch the cars go by. So we sit, alone together, eating our grilled cheese sandwiches.

"That one was going 70 at the least!" a local says from outside as the door swings open and closes again behind our host, who's told us to yell if we need anything.

Peppered around us are vintage television sets from decades before my time, most of them turned off but one showing a woman's face, close-up in black and white, slowly enunciating a phrase I can't make out. A few are tuned to slow-changing scenes of what appear to be moonscapes, but maybe they're just shots of local land. An 8-track player teases an array of sounds from Patsy Cline to Black Sabbath; right now, Ozzy's in command of the Museum of Electric Wonders and Late Night Grilled Cheese Parlour, the place's proper title. The room is thick with an extraterrestrial vibe, and yet it all still feels like home.



We've come for a two-day adventure, having heard about this town for years – its weirdness, its wonder, its ability to slow time down like honey. It's our second and final night here, and it's just as quiet and absurd as we thought it would be.

The cachet of the place has risen of late, thanks mainly to a stellar celebrity drop-in or two and an Instagram-perfect local culture awash with harsh beauty and gentle character. Because understanding the intersection of art and marketing (and the steep drop that exists just outside of where they meet) is a task not given to most government officials, state transportation authorities are threatening to uproot one of the area's most popular curiosities – a shoe store (of sorts) that never opens. And

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unbeknownst to me as I stand in front of it and sheepishly attempt “The Beyonce Shot” that’s become so popular, it’s about to be vandalized in the name of (and yet also, against) a for-profit company that, until recently, hung its hat on its reputation for doing non-profit-esque things.

The times, they are a-changin’. I wonder if Marfa minds.

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**T**he stars at night are big and bright deep in the heart of Texas, but over in its westward hip, they’re even more insistent.

High atop a mountain in Fort Davis, a 45-minute drive from Marfa, sits the McDonald Observatory, a crown jewel in the University of Texas at Austin’s astronomy program. For \$12, visitors can attend a “star party,” which begins with a guided tour of that night’s heavenly bodies and ends with a series of glimpses through some of the most powerful telescopes in the world. The night we attend, Jupiter’s stripes are fully visible, as are thousands of twinkling stars dotting the sky in a tight but random pattern.

I’ve never seen a nightscape this breathtaking. As I look up through the atmosphere as far into the Milky Way as I can, I think of my mom and wonder where the energy that left her body is now. I sit there on a stone slab, craning my neck to look up as high as I can. I’m starkly reminded what tiny specks we all are in the scheme of everything, staring into the darkness and asking it all of our little questions.

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The observatory, for one, hopes to seek answers through the new telescope it’s helping to build, along with other scholastic partners around the globe. One of the partners in the Giant Magellan Telescope project, it plays an integral part in the production of one of the biggest and most powerful telescopes in history. The scope itself will be housed in the Atacama Desert in northern Chile upon its completion in ten years or so.





Taken by the sky, we leave the star party and decide to stop off at the Marfa Lights Viewing Station (kind of a must for tourists) before we head back to El Cosmico, where we're staying – that mythical, mystical playground of teepees, tents and Airstream trailers, all perfectly decked out in austere desert luxuries: handmade Bolivian blankets, dusty wood floors and pierced Mexican tin lamps giving off a kaleidoscope glow. I've bestowed a nickname upon our accommodations: "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Campground." I wonder if Liz Lambert, its owner and designer, would chuckle at that description.

We pull off of the highway to the viewing station, a roundish structure with a deck jutting out into

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nothingness, ideal for staring up at the wild night sky. A handful of girls are chatting with an older local woman who's telling them she comes out here all the time but never sees the legendary Marfa lights from beyond – whatever they might be. The girls are incredulous.

"We just saw them!" they exclaim. "Right when we got here! You barely missed them."

The woman seems crestfallen but perks herself up in record time. "You know what I DID see tonight?" she asks with pride. "A shooting star."

Later, as we're shivering into the delicacy that is our heated bed against the 40-degree air swirling around the rest of our tent, we realize a couple of the girls from the viewing station are in the tent right next to us. They giggle and goof off loudly while we try to sleep. The earplugs I tried earlier had me fixating on the sound of my own heartbeat to the point of anxious insomnia, so I've long since tossed them aside. I rustle around in bed, fully eavesdropping against my will, vaguely irritated at the gaiety next door. Around 1 am, after a little lull in their conversation, one of the girls starts singing a bit of "On the Radio" by Regina Spektor, a sweet, meandering song about the fact that everything is cyclical and no one's ever alone for long.

The other girl chimes in on the "oh-oh" part at the end of the chorus. I forgive them both as I drift off to sleep.

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**E**arlier in the day, I've stepped into the lobby – a psychedelic living room, really – to take a few pictures and pick up a memento or two in its store. My hand wanders across the pages of Ram Dass' *Remember, Be Here Now* and sifts through blank pages of journals. A small group has gathered just outside the doorway, chatting with excitement about the weekend's art opening at Ballroom Marfa up the street. The exhibit focuses on what happens to a small town when Hollywood comes calling to make a film within its borders, as Warner Bros. did with *Giant* here in 1956, an epic tale



that brought Elizabeth Taylor, James Dean and Rock Hudson along with it to shoot its scenes.

What draws people to this place, I think with a hint of dread as I listen to their conversation, could ultimately be what hurts it. Its laid-back, rough-and-tumble perfection set against its otherworldly backdrop is so noteworthy that those of us who live outside of it can't help but take a tiny bite of it for ourselves, just to see what it tastes like. There's something sort of rock star off-duty about the place, and that's addictive. The stark, simple buildings stacked against a knowing sky, the simplicity of everything, the romance of the land – it's capable of making its visitors think bigger thoughts or, perhaps for once, no thoughts at all. The clean slate and creative promise it offers intoxicates.

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*Come have this, it beckons. Slide into neutral. Check out for a while.*



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Photo: Amy Lynn





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And that's what a few folks here have done. Artists who just need to drop off the grid for a while and create, inspired by a town whose hourglass seems to have stopped. They're part of what feeds the energy of the place, along with the lifers who don't know any other way... or who have tried the other way, decided it's for the birds and come back. As for the rest of us, though – the folks who drift through town for a soul holiday – I worry about us a little. I can't help but hope we don't mess things up in the name of trying to enjoy them. I hope our wear-and-tear doesn't hurt anything. This little speck of the universe deserves to be preserved.

The gallery group hugs and scatters, a few trekking off to their tents, teepees and campers as others drift inside to shop. I lift a bar of Marfa soap to my face and inhale. It's what's giving the space its scent – vetiver, sage, patchouli and clove. As I pay for the bar and a couple of gifts, I can just make out strains of Stevie Nicks' voice. It's "Gold Dust Woman." *Rumours*. '76.

"Of course," I think. "It's perfect."

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I stand in the middle of Highway 67 (or US90, if that's what you prefer), jumping up and down over and over again on the centerline when no cars are whizzing past the Prada Marfa installation, which is technically in the town of Valentine. During the half-hour drive alongside a desolate set of railroad tracks to get here, we've been treated to a series of Beatles songs sung wistfully in Spanish by a Mexican vocal group – a gem unearthed by the midday DJ of Marfa's public (and only) radio station. I'm Beyoncing, as I've taken to calling it, re-enacting some of the shots the pop legend took and shared online when she was in town on a girls' trip in 2012, setting off media sparks in the rearview as she left. "Art in front of Art," one reporter famously snarked of her mid-jump photograph in front of the landmark, which was set in place, ostensibly, to foster discussions of conspicuous consumption.

Am I here because of Beyonce? No. I'm here because, since moving to Austin years ago, I've heard besotted friends and



acquaintances recounting their dreamy experiences in the west, leaving their troubles behind for a few days while they stripped away the trappings of everyday life and just lived simply for a minute. So, that's what we do. We drive for seven hours, listening to the Stones on repeat. We do our best to Be Here Now. We glamp in a tent, we take photographs of one another, of things, of places, of sky, and we quietly sample a slice of life in a still-heavenly art town. And then we go away, hoping we haven't disturbed anything too terribly.

In two weeks' time, a street artist will deface this little building in the middle of nowhere, leaving behind a disjointed manifesto dropping references to Kerouac and Matisse and confusing the public as to whether he's been commissioned by, or has launched a full-scale rant against, TOMS Shoes. He will paint the sides blue, tear holes in the awnings, and slather the windows with ads for the ever-expanding one-for-one company that just opened a store in Austin and started selling coffee, too. He will beg for buzz, and we will give it to him. It'll be mostly angry, of course, but he'll get what he wants all the same, and so, in a strange way, will the people who may or may not have asked him to do so.

As it often does elsewhere, art here imitates life, reflects on it, questions it, and lets us come to our own conclusions. But the sky here never shrinks the way it does in other places. I hope its soul stays just as lush, no matter what thieves may come. ■

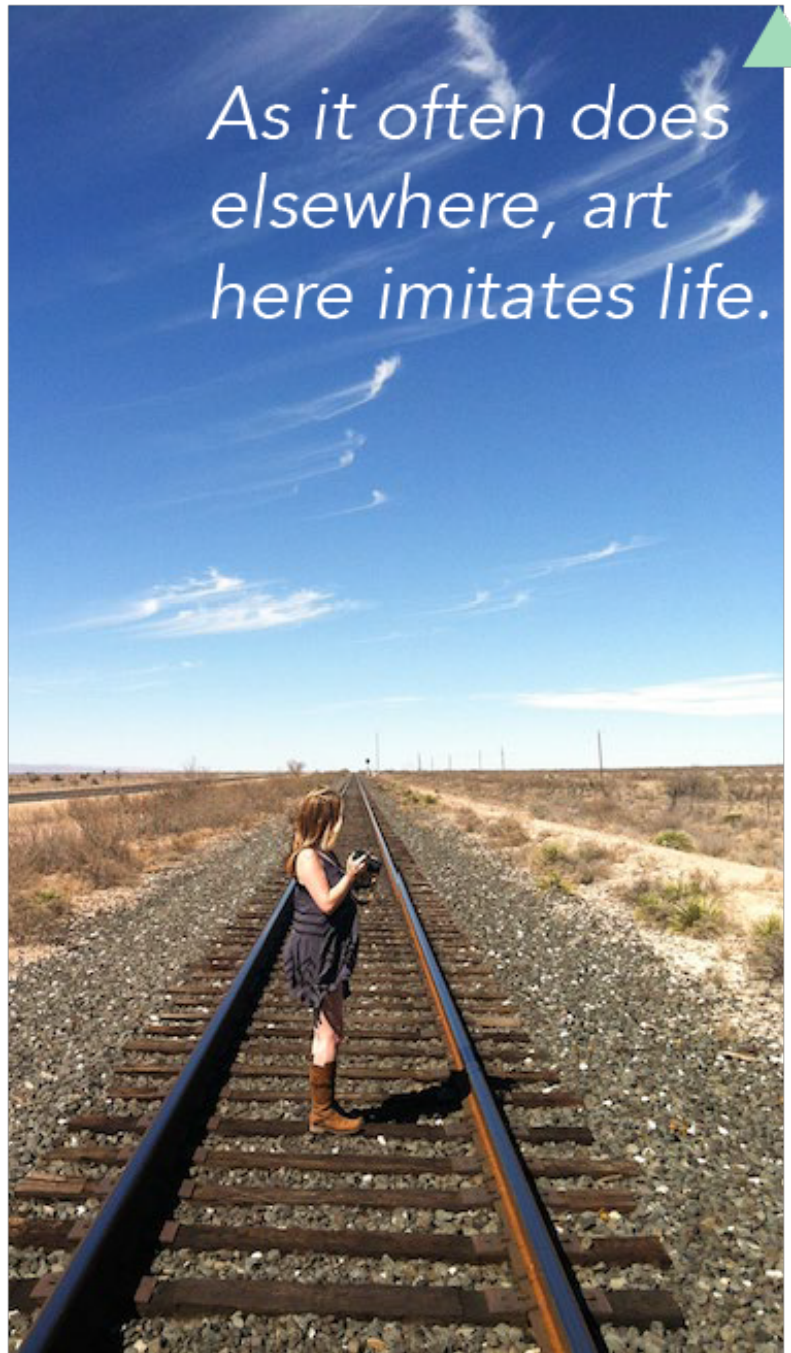


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