

EXTRAORDINARY TEXANS

THESE PEOPLE HELP MAKE TEXAS SPECTACULAR

What does it take to be extraordinary? The Texans in these pages have each made their marks in vastly varied fields—from winemaking and writing to inventing a new way to watch movies—and they share characteristics essential to any true trailblazer: the bravery to try something different and the perseverance to carry their visions through. And for that, we salute this year's Extraordinary Texans.



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State-park traveler Dale Blasingame and his dog Lucy at Onion Creek.

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SUSAN AND ED AULER

TEXAS WINE AMBASSADORS

“I wonder if anyone has tried growing grapes in the Hill Country?” Ed Auler remembers asking his wife, Susan, while driving through France in 1973, noting similarities in the terrain. And thus began a life-long passion. On that trip, they learned everything they could about wine, and when they returned to Texas, the couple began researching how to plant grapes on their ranch in Tow, which eventually became home to Fall Creek Vineyards. A little more than 40 years later, with award-winning wines that have been served to presidents and princes, the Aulers are at the forefront of the Texas winemaking movement.

The Aulers, who in 2015 opened a second Fall Creek Vineyards location in Driftwood, are committed to refining winemaking in the region as a whole. In 2013, they hired Sergio Cuadra, a world-class winemaker from Chile, to cultivate their vineyards and bring an international perspective to

their wines. Cuadra has dispelled many of the myths about Texas winemaking, proving that almost any grape can grow here and that plants can adapt to the heat; it's a matter of matching the right grapes with the right soil.

“There is an explosion of wineries and vineyards in Texas,” says Susan Auler, “but not all of them are getting the right technical information on how to grow and make wine. We want to share what we have learned to help others, and we want to raise the bar for all of Texas.”

The Aulers believe that winemaking should be a collaborative endeavor. “The wine community in the Hill Country is very supportive: If we run out of filters or something, there is usually someone nearby who can fill in, and vice versa. It's been so heartwarming—the people and the experiences that we have had over the past 40-plus years in the winemaking world. Wine is like a magnet: it draws people together.”



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RUBY AND THE RECKLESS

GENRE-BREAKING MUSICIANS

Lead singer of Ruby and The Reckless, Austin-based Ruby Jane Smith has been a fiddle sensation since she was eight. At age 10, she was the youngest fiddler ever to take the stage at the Grand Ole Opry; at 14 she toured with Willie Nelson and Ray Benson; at 15 she was playing the Austin City Limits Festival with Blues Traveler.

Now, at the ripe old age of 21, she is exploring new musical terrain. Smith, the fiddle prodigy who seems wise for her age, has stepped into a new role: Lead fiddle and singer for a five-person band that defies easy categorization.

“We are psychedelic indie music with a jazz-funk overtone led by a fiddle,” says bassist Austin Simmons. In 2015, the band won the prestigious Black Fret grant, and Smith has been writing and arranging new music with Simmons, drummer Chris Copeland, and the other two members of The Reckless to find a new collaborative sound. The

band's latest record will be released this fall. “Honestly, I am more passionate about the music we are doing now than I ever have been,” says Smith, who was born in Dallas and raised in Mississippi. “I never wanted to be just a fiddle, swing, or jazz person. I've always wanted to play music that reaches a bigger group of people. I'm excited for this partnership, the writing we are developing and the music we are creating now.”

With influences that range from Erykah Badu and Jill Scott to Wilco, Ruby and The Reckless may defy easy categorization, but whatever you may call their music, the energy the band creates together on stage is irresistible—it's music that makes you want to dance. Ruby Jane Smith may always be a fiddling phenomenon, but with Ruby and The Reckless, she and her bandmates are pushing their limits and making music that has come of age.



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DONNA HOWELL-SICKLES

NORTH TEXAS VISIONARY AND COWGIRL PAINTER

North Texas artist Donna Howell-Sickles is a woman of persistence. For more than 40 years she has been painting cowgirls—playful, energetic portraits that convey the spirit of women with grit. Her persistence also shines in another one of her passion projects—revitalizing the Red River valley town of Saint Jo, where she lives with her husband John Sickles. Together, they are bringing fresh life to this rural outpost one renovated building at a time.

While the subjects of her portraits are cowgirls, Howell-Sickles is most interested in conveying the friendship and humor of strong women. “I decided forever ago that I wanted to be drawing women who know how to celebrate the joy that life holds,” she says.

Howell-Sickles—who grew up in the rural community of Sivells Bend, about 35 miles northeast of Saint Jo—had originally thought about buying land in Wyoming, but in 1995, she and John drove through Saint Jo. The land was so beautiful

they decided to buy a ranch there, and then relocated to the little town of about 1,000 residents in 2000. She later discovered that her great-grandfather, John Houston Howell, was the younger brother of Joe Anderson Howell, the co-founder of Saint Jo.

The town was so sleepy in 2007 that you couldn’t even buy gas there. Howell-Sickles and her husband made a leap of faith and slowly began renovating historic buildings on and around the town square, and in 2010 they opened an art gallery and gift shop. Now the town is abuzz with fresh energy and a dynamic chamber of commerce.

Because Saint Jo is only about 80 miles northwest of Fort Worth, Howell-Sickles believes this picturesque little town will be an inviting rural escape for city dwellers. “It’s an exciting project with a lot of fun people,” she says. “Saint Jo is a nice place to be and it’s a nice time to be here.”

Howell-Sickles has as much determination and *joie de vivre* as the cowgirls she is famous for painting.



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JO ANN ANDERA

DIRECTOR OF THE TEXAS FOLKLIFE FESTIVAL

It’s a small world, after all. Or at least that’s the way it can feel at the Texas Folklife Festival, the largest cultural melting pot celebration in the state, where you can watch Polish dancers, eat Pakistani *pakor*as, and learn how to throw a pot with Texas clay masters all in the course of an afternoon. Hosted every summer by the Institute of Texan Cultures in San Antonio, such worldly adventures can be yours thanks to Jo Ann Andera, the festival’s director, who deftly coordinates the more than 300 participants, an army of volunteers, and some 40,000 annual festival-goers.

“Everyone needs a voice,” says Andera. “Some of our new immigrants in Texas are struggling. With the Folklife Festival, we bring them into a setting that is very welcoming and showcase their cultures. You see that people you might only hear about on the news are regular people just like you. It’s an obligation we have as a festival to give all groups a voice, whether they are new to Texas or old-timers—

and the Institute of Texas Cultures certainly does that.”

Andera, the daughter of Lebanese immigrants, knows a thing or two about finding a voice. Born and raised in San Antonio, Andera began working as a multilingual guide at the Institute of Texan Cultures in 1972. A few years later, she joined the nascent festival’s Lebanese dance troupe. In 1981, she moved up to direct the entire event, a role that she has filled so well it’s hard to imagine the festival without her.

As the director for 35 years, Andera has ample experience with all of the generosity, competition, and quirks that come with such a multicultural crowd. “The Ukrainians come in from Dallas, the Italians from Galveston, the Chileans from Houston. They all get to know each other; you see them hugging,” she says. “And there is also a bit of competition as they try to outdo each other. One year, the Ukrainians did these jumping dances, and the next year, several other groups incorporated jumps into their performances.”



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JOE LANSDALE

EAST TEXAS STORYTELLER

With the 2014 film *Cold in July* under his belt and his celebrity-packed series *Hap and Leonard* now a top show on SundanceTV, you might think that East Texas writer Joe Lansdale was just now getting the attention that his knuckle-biting novels deserve. But in reality Lansdale has been a writing success since the late 1980s, and his character-driven, darkly comic stories have long earned him a cult following and the adoration of fans as far afield as Italy and Germany, where he has been immensely popular for years. “Critics have been enormously kind to me,” says Lansdale, who was born in Gladewater. Before he became a successful full-time writer in his late 20s, he worked as a janitor, a field hand, and a farm worker, just as his lovable characters Hap and Leonard do in the eponymous novels-turned-TV series.

With a new book coming out on Little Brown and Co.’s

Mulholland Books imprint next year, Lansdale is busy and prolific, but that doesn’t mean he writes all day. A dedicated family man and a veteran martial-arts specialist who runs his own academy in Nacogdoches, Lansdale has too many other things to do. “I work for about three hours a day,” says Lansdale with his endearing East Texas twang. “I’ve got too much life to live. And living life is what makes the writing fun. When I’m out in it, that’s what gives the writing its juice.”

And although his career often keeps him on the road—from Los Angeles film sets to book tours in Italy—Nacogdoches is his home. His stories, taut with humor and insight into the racial and social tensions of his hometown, rise up from the sultry Piney Woods he loves. “I grew up in East Texas. It’s what I know, what I love. I don’t want to live where there aren’t trees. East Texas has a darker feel about it—it’s where my work is rooted. It’s my refuge.”



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GLEENDA JOE

DIRECTOR OF LUNAR NEW YEAR HOUSTON

If you would like to see a hundred lions and dragons dancing amid the roar of one million Lucky Red Firecrackers, then get yourself to Lunar New Year Houston, one of the largest such festivals in the world and one of the few that still uses fireworks, which are now banned in most public celebrations. But thanks to Glenda Joe, the Chinese-Irish-Texan cross-cultural communicator who organizes this epic celebration, the firecrackers still explode in Houston.

In January or February each year, Glenda Joe directs TexAsia’s annual nonprofit event, Lunar New Year Houston, attracting 60,000-plus Houstonians of all backgrounds. TexAsia’s mission is to preserve and present authentic arts traditions for Houston. She also heads the Houston Language Bank, a nonprofit project that delivers vital public information to underserved immigrant and refugee communities. “We need to change the way we communicate,” says Joe. “We

believe that the delivery of shared information builds shared values—and this is the cornerstone of American vitality and the foundation of community cohesion.”

Glenda Joe’s background in finding common ground amid cultural difference is long and varied. The Joe family patriarch, Jim Joe, settled in Houston in 1882 and started one of the first Chinese businesses in the city. Joe grew up working in her father’s store and observed at a young age how her African-American and Hispanic neighbors were treated differently. When she saw how miscommunication triggered violence, she wrote a “how-to” cultural-awareness resource titled *The Asian Merchant’s Handbook*, which was distributed nationwide. In 1967, she organized her first civil rights rally and coaxed her dad to speak at it. How can Texas’ different cultures get along and find common ground? “Listen,” she says. “Learn empathy. Walk a mile in their shoes.”



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DALE BLASINGAME

STATE PARK ADVENTURER

From July 2014 to July 2015, Dale Blasingame, a journalism lecturer at Texas State University in San Marcos, put about 45,000 miles on his new car in a quest to visit each of Texas' 100 or so state parks. With his dog Lucy in tow, this Harlingen native crisscrossed the state, sometimes visiting as many as 18 parks in one trip.

A man who loves a mission, Blasingame fell in love with the parks of Texas. "When I'm outside, that's my decompression time to get away with my dog. I love it. I sometimes wonder what I did with the first 36 years of my life."

Because he visited so much of Texas in just one year, Blasingame saw up-close the extreme diversity of the state's landscapes and what precious resources they are. He still gets chill bumps thinking about the night he lay on top of his car watching a lightning storm roll in over the desert near Marfa, or his first glimpse of the lush Gorman Falls in Colorado Bend State Park.

"We are so lucky to live in a state that has anything you want," says Blasingame. "If you want canyons, we have a park for that. Or if you want beaches, or swamps, or mountains... Texas has almost every kind of setting."

Blasingame is now teaching a class with help from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, marrying his passion for Texas parks with his career as a professor of new media. This past spring, he took 15 students, many of them first-time campers, to Garner State Park, where they used their talents to produce social video content to promote the park system. "The students loved it. The more people experience these parks, the more they are going to want to protect them," says Blasingame, who hopes to create more awareness about these local treasures.

A man who is driven by improbable quests, Blasingame is now in the process of visiting all 410-plus national park properties. "This project I know will take forever, but that's fine with me."



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CHRISTINE AND DAYTONA CELIS

BREWING BELLWETHERS

A Belgian-born Texan and the daughter of the late Pierre Celis, the legendary brewer who opened Austin's first craft brewery in 1992, Christine Celis is the Lone Star State's First Lady of Craft Beer. Currently working with Uncle Billy's Brewery in Austin, she and her daughter Daytona, along with master brewer Kim Clarke, plan to open a new brewery in Austin in early 2017, rescuing Pierre Celis' famous Old World *witbier* while also creating original New World beers with daring tastes of their own.

As a child in Hoegaarden, Belgium, her father's brewery—with its open mash tun and copper kettles—was her play-scape. "I can still smell the spent grains, the sweetness of the orange peels," says Celis. "Every time I walk into a brewery, I get flashbacks to when I would hang out with my dad when he was brewing. It's great."

Pierre Celis was renowned in Belgium for reviving the Hoegaarden *witbier*, which was brewed locally since the 1400s

but was lost when the last *witbier* brewery closed its doors in 1955. When Pierre came to Austin and opened Celis Brewery in 1992, he brought a similar *witbier* recipe with him; named Celis White, it and other Celis beers introduced many Texans to the world of craft beers. In 2000, however, the brewery was bought by the Miller Company, which closed Celis within a year.

But now the beer maven is back. For the new enterprise, the Flemish Fox Brewery & Craftworks, the Celis women are transporting Pierre's original brewing equipment from Hoegaarden to Austin. Eventually, it will form part of a beer museum, and the Celises hope to use the antique machinery to educate others on the history of beer-making—and occasionally crank it up for a fresh batch of *witbier*. "By making the beers that my dad used to brew, I want to bring back a piece of history, part of Austin's very first craft brewery," says Christine. "And I am so happy that Daytona has caught the brewing bug, too."



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TIM AND KARRIE LEAGUE

FILM BUFFS AND FOUNDERS OF THE ALAMO DRAFTHOUSE CINEMA

Wired magazine called the Alamo Drafthouse Cinema “the coolest movie theater in the world.” With more than 20 Alamo Drafthouses now operating throughout the United States, it’s clear that the Alamo is a theater experience that film fans can’t get enough of. Once you’ve seen a movie at the Alamo, it’s hard to go back to the standard shopping-mall multiplex.

The Alamo Drafthouse chain sprang from the passion of film buffs Tim and Karrie League, who left their science careers in 1994 to revamp a beat-up theater in Bakersfield, California. Soon thereafter, they moved to Austin, opened their first Alamo in 1997, and set to work creating the kind of interactive and experimental movie-going experiences that they wanted to have for themselves and their friends.

Their vision has morphed into a cinema revolution. At the Alamo Drafthouse, not only can you tuck into a gourmet

pizza or sip a craft IPA or cocktail while screening a film, you can also sing along to your favorite musical or participate in a quote-along with classics like *The Princess Bride*. To really blur the lines between film and food, the Alamo curates menus to enhance the movie-watching experience; for example, *Titanic* viewers enjoyed a menu inspired by the one served on the last night of that doomed voyage. The Leagues have invented a one-of-a-kind movie experience, an endlessly creative mash-up of film, food, music, and place.

“The most fun thing about our work is being able to act on fantastic ideas for making great movies even more special by putting together complementary menus, or lining up amazing musicians to create new scores, or finding perfect locations for outdoor events,” says Karrie. She and Tim have redefined the film experience, and movie-watching will never be the same again.

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CROCODILE LILE

ROUTE 66 BOOSTER AND “CADILITE” INVENTOR

We have a saying here on Route 66,” says Crocodile Lile, longtime officer of the Texas Old Route 66 Association and owner of Lile Art Gallery in Amarillo: “‘Friends don’t let friends drive the Interstate.’ It’s true. On the interstate, you never meet anybody and never see a thing. Life begins on the off ramp.”

Crocodile Lile, also known as Bob Lile or “Croc,” received his reptilian nickname while leading a Boy Scout trip to Australia. He has cruised Route 66 too many times to count and knows nearly every character along the way. He is now a Route 66 guide for Gilligan’s Tours out of New Zealand, and twice a year he leads a convoy of shiny Mustangs for a three-week, get-your-kicks tour from Chicago to Los Angeles. Recently, he introduced a van tour for people who don’t want to drive.

Even his current artistic creation, “Cadilite” jewelry,

pays homage to Route 66—in miniature, wearable form. Inspired by the look of Fordite, which is jewelry made from Ford Motor factory paint chips, Crocodile Lile retrieves paint peelings from Cadillac Ranch, the famous assemblage of inverted Cadillacs on I-40, a few miles west of Amarillo. In a meticulous process, he shaves the paint pieces until they reveal a color range he likes, and then he transforms the ‘Cadilite’ into necklaces, rings, and earrings.

When he’s not on the road, Lile champions the thrills of the Mother Road and sells these pretty, upcycled nuggets of Route 66 culture from his gallery on “Antique Road,” aka S.W. 6th Street—about 10 blocks of shops, restaurants, and galleries on old Route 66 in Amarillo. If he’s not there when you stop by, call the number in the window. If he’s in town, he’ll come on down to see you. 🐊

