

Dustin Hall

10-09-2010

“Story of an Artist: Painter and Musician Ethan Azarian Forges His Own Path to Self-Sufficiency”

For every artist who is able to make a living doing what he loves, there are dozens more who fail. This is especially evident in a city like Austin, home to countless part-time musicians, painters, actors and directors who are critically praised for their efforts but nonetheless remain bound to a “day job”. There are exceptions, however, and Austin-based musician and painter Ethan Azarian is one of them. Azarian, 47, has found a way to support himself and his family by painting, but it hasn’t always been easy. In 1994, he left his day job and fully committed himself to the pursuit of his art.

“My analogy at the time was, I’m going to approach it like a drug addict,” Azarian said in an interview. “I’m going to make sure that I put in so many hours a week, and I’m going to make sure that I don’t spend money I don’t need to. I’m going to keep my car running, if I can afford it – if I can’t afford it, then I’ve got my bicycle. If I use that approach, where everything was all about being able to paint, the same way if you were an addict, then it would be all about getting your next fix. And that really worked for me.”

Though his approach may have been unconventional, it was effective. Today, Azarian’s distinctive folk-art paintings of cows and cityscapes are in high demand. And he performs as a solo musician, following a run as the singer and guitarist for local favorites The Orange Mothers throughout the ‘90s and early 2000s.

Azarian, a native of Vermont, seems to have had the sort of idyllic rural childhood portrayed in the paintings of Norman Rockwell. He lived on a farm with his parents and siblings, along with assorted cows, chickens and horses. Both of his parents were musicians, and his dad was well-known for performing at local square-dances. Family friends often came over for impromptu performances, and at night the sounds of guitars, banjos and fiddles could be heard throughout

the Azarian house. During the winters, Ethan and his brothers would sled, ski and play games on the farm. Nearby, there were circuses and puppet theaters.

At the age of 7, Azarian picked up a guitar for the first time. Following in his father's footsteps, he soon began playing acoustic guitar and banjo at local folk dances. By the age of 15, he had switched to the electric guitar and started a punk rock band with some friends. Rather than playing covers of songs by other groups, the young band (named AZN, a play on Azarian's surname) began to write its own original songs, with Azarian serving as the primary songwriter.

Around the same time, Azarian began to take an interest in painting. This, too, ran in the Azarian family, since Ethan's mother had long worked as a printmaker. He credits his lack of formal art training with contributing to his whimsical, colorful artistic style, as well as his choice of subjects. The rural scenes of cows and farmland he is commonly associated with were a familiar part of his childhood, but his often surreal paintings of cityscapes provide a stark contrast to his life in Vermont.

"I've always loved cities," Azarian said. "I remember traveling with my grandparents late at night down the East Coast, on I-95 through Philadelphia, New York, and Baltimore. Having been raised in Vermont, the city seemed exciting, dashing, and romantic – all the people there, and all the things to do and see. I was always curious about cities."

After high school, Azarian formed a new band known as the Hollywood Indians. Based out of Burlington, the group released several albums of "souped-up punk rock folk songs" during the '80s and experienced some success touring throughout New England with contemporaries including Phish, Husker Dü and the Dead Milkmen. It was an exciting time for Azarian, but being in the band failed to pay the bills. As the '80s drew to a close, Azarian decided it was time to leave Vermont.

“I thought I really should go see another part of the world,” Azarian said. “But I was pretty scared and I took a long time to get to that point. I gave myself a year to get ready to go to Austin. And I had no intentions of staying there for more than 5 or 6 months. I didn’t want to make a big scene about going there and not coming back to Vermont. And I told everybody ‘Well, I’ll be back next fall or whatever.’ But part of me really was prepared to stay if I liked Austin and I felt comfortable there.”

And Azarian did like Austin – especially the cheap rent, the warm weather and the thriving music scene. In fact, he now seems like a prototypical Austin artist – creative, quirky, and self-reliant. He speaks – and sings – solemnly, with a slight lisp and a childlike, innocent tone. When he paints, his spectacles and tasseled salt-and-pepper hair give him the air of a mad scientist with an easel.

But even in Austin, Azarian struggled financially. Like a number of other local musicians, he found part-time work at the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired as a residential instructor, helping students with everyday activities before and after classes. But he also engaged in some less virtuous activities to help make ends meet.

“I would get food stamps,” Azarian said. “I’d lie about whatever it was so I could get food stamps. And I really was living below the poverty level, so I wasn’t really lying, but I’d say things like, ‘well I just moved into town, and I need emergency food stamps.’ Or, I’d switch labels in Whole Foods and get stuff cheaper. I wouldn’t do that stuff now, but I did back then.”

Mostly, however, Azarian learned how to do without the conveniences and creature comforts others take for granted.

“I didn’t spend money on clothes, not that I ever did anyway,” he said. “And I didn’t spend any money on shoes. I never had a fancy car. So really, that worked. I lived on very little. And I

always had roommates. And over time, that allowed me to get my technique down, and that allowed me to get a little bit of a niche in Austin. And as the years went by, things got easier.”

According to local musician Jeff Johnston, Azarian’s longtime friend and musical collaborator, Azarian benefitted by having an artistic family that supported his endeavors.

“He’s a real genuine person and creative, because he comes from such a creative family,” Johnston said. “Both his parents are artists and musicians. I think that’s where he gets a lot of his artistry from, and the ability to just say ‘OK, I’m gonna be an artist and not have a job.’ I think that’s because he saw his parents do that.”

In many ways, Azarian has had to forge his own path to artistic self-sufficiency. When he could not find an art gallery to display his paintings, he turned his entire home into one, christening it the In House Gallery. Visitors to the house can view and purchase past pieces, and see him working on new ones. And it is the site of occasional musical performances by Azarian and friends, bringing the tradition established by his parents on the farm in rural Vermont to funky East Austin.

“The gallery was really a blessing in disguise,” he said, “because I was able to keep my paintings very cheap and accessible. And the people who buy from me really like coming to the house because it’s funky, and I’m there talking about the paintings, and I write on the backs of most of my paintings about what I ate that day, or what’s going on like a diary. So a lot of people just like to keep up with the whole ‘What’s that guy doing now?’ kind of thing, and ‘We can buy it right from him, and it’s in his house.’ That’s really worked well for me.”

The In House Gallery has also had a positive impact on Azarian’s personal life. In 2000, a friend brought local cellist and collage artist Melissa Knight to the house to look at the artwork. Afterward, Knight gave Azarian a down payment for one of his paintings. Later in the year, she returned to pay the rest of the money, and the two hit it off. They have now been married for

ten years. As it turned out, Azarian got to keep the money and the painting, which now hangs on the couple's bedroom wall.

Today, many of Azarian's sales are commissions, requested by people who have seen his paintings in the homes of friends and in local businesses. He has also branched out into painting murals in public spaces and private homes. And he continues to sing and compose music, with plans to release a third album of solo acoustic material next year. The reality of life as an artist may prove challenging at times, but Azarian would not have it any other way.

"The idea of working for somebody else, and not having the time or freedom to leave Austin – I think that's what drives me to be a musician and an artist," he said. "You can really make your own itinerary that way. I can paint and play music in Vermont, or San Francisco. Or I can spend time in Mexico. I love that freedom. So, I don't have health insurance, and I don't have a lot of money, but I have my freedom, which is invaluable."