



AUSTIN CITY LIMITS MUSIC FESTIVAL
3 DAYS • 8 STAGES • 130 BANDS

A C L
MUSIC FEST

10
ANNIVERSARY

AUSTIN CITY LIMITS

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OUTDOOR CONCERTS AND FESTIVALS



Covering a festival is unlike any other event you'll ever shoot. Photographing a festival such as Bonnaroo, Lollapalooza, Austin City Limits, or any of the hundreds of other festivals that have cropped up over the past ten years is an exercise in maintaining your stamina.

When shooting a festival you will need to cover all of the bases of concert photography, from small stages that are poorly lit (similar to bar lighting) all the way up to huge stadium-sized stages. Most festivals have a variety of stages depending on what career level a band is at. The newer bands usually play the smaller stages, often called *side stages*, while the main stages are generally reserved for headliners. The lighting covers all the bases as well, because you will be required to shoot throughout the day at different stages in constantly changing lighting situations. Shooting a festival really keeps you on your toes.

The other thing you really need to be on top of when shooting a festival are your post-processing skills. You need to get the images edited and available right away to maximize sale potential. Even if you don't need to get the images up right away, editing on the fly allows you to avoid spending hours upon hours editing thousands of images down the line.



4.1 Every festival has different lighting setups and types of stages. The SXSW Music Conference and Festival is an annual festival that features thousands of bands on hundreds of different stages. Here the New York Dolls play SXSW 2009. Taken with a Nikon D700 with a Nikon 28-70mm f/2.8D at 28mm; ISO 3200 for 1/160 at f/2.8, matrix metering.

PLANNING

The key to successfully surviving a festival is planning. Yes, I said surviving, because without the proper planning you will run yourself ragged and in the end you won't have any fun. And let's face it, we all started in this field of photography because we love music and photography and ultimately want to have fun.

Planning for a festival comes in stages and starts weeks before the festival actually begins. Most festivals these days have dropped the "touring" business model and have opted for a once-a-year multiday event at a certain location, however there are still a few touring festivals out there such as the Warped Tour and the Mayhem Festival.

First and foremost in the planning process is getting credentialed and securing a photo pass. In theory, it's a simple process, but actually getting credentialed is the real trouble. To start off, you need to find an outlet to shoot for. Festival promoters



4.2 Once you have secured your credentials you're ready to shoot!

aren't interested in filling up the press areas and photo pits with photographers looking to add to their portfolio, so you *will* need an assignment. Your local newspaper, a magazine, or a webzine are all good places to start. Particularly successful blogs are often accepted as well. For the most part, approaching an outlet that is music-based is going to be your best bet when looking for an entity to shoot for.

Go to the festival website and find the press area; there will be a link to a press application. Have a letter of assignment on hand to attach to the form. The PR agencies *will* check for the validity of your assignment, so don't even think about trying to make something up. If they find out you've submitted a fraudulent form, your name will likely be red-flagged and you'll be blacklisted from this and any other festival the PR firm handles. This is no joke.

Scheduling

Once you've been credentialed the next thing on the planning list is scheduling. You need to decide which bands are important for you to shoot and cross-reference them with the time they're playing and at which stage they'll be performing. Scheduling is like choreography. If you don't get it just right you'll trip and fall.

The first step is taking a look at the lineup to see who's performing. Selecting which bands to shoot is very subjective. There's a few ways to look at it depending on the scope of your assignment. If you've got carte blanche to shoot whatever you want, you can go through and pick your favorite bands. Since I shoot for an agency, I depend on sales to make money, so I select bands or performers that I know have the potential to sell images. Headliners, hot up-and-comers, and established acts that may be doing a reunion are all good candidates.



4.3 Jimmy Buffet made an unannounced appearance at Bonnaroo 2009. Surprise appearances are a great opportunity to sell photos. Taken with a Nikon D300s with a Nikon 80-200mm f/2.8D at 200mm; ISO 200 for 1/1250 at f/2.8, spot metering.

If you're on assignment you may be need to cover specific bands, so that makes it a little easier to set your schedule, although there may be conflicts in scheduling times. Some photographers on assignment shoot only what they have been asked to shoot, some shoot other things as well if they have ample time.

Once you've decided which performers you want to cover the next thing to do is look at the scheduling times. Most festivals have online schedules that make it pretty easy to make a layout of your schedule. Obviously you can't be two places at once, and there will be a lot of times where there are overlaps where two bands you want to shoot are playing at the same time. You have to make a decision about which performer is more important to you.

One of the main problems that you run into is setting up a realistic schedule. As with most concerts you can only shoot the first three songs on most of the stages, and if you have two bands that start 5 or 10 minutes apart, it's unlikely you will be able to shoot them both. You must also remember to factor in travel time between stages, and don't forget you will have to deal with the crowd, which can add quite a few minutes to your travel.

The first time you schedule for a festival it's easy to overbook yourself. Don't get frustrated if you can't get to everything you want to get. The best thing to do is to schedule the things you *want* to shoot, and set priorities for what you *have* to shoot. As you shoot more festivals and shoot the same festivals over again, scheduling gets easier, as you have a better idea of how much time it takes to travel back and forth to the different stages.

Once you've finished setting your schedule be sure that you have a copy of it when you're on site. You don't want to have to recheck the schedule and decide from memory. Most festivals offer an online scheduling application that shows you the lineup and set times and lets you select the bands that you want to shoot, and then builds a personalized schedule for you. Most festivals now have smartphone apps that allow you to do your scheduling right on your phone, and some of the websites allow you to export your personalized schedule to smartphone apps such as Apple iCal.

I have come to rely on my iPhone as an integral piece of my gear when shooting a festival. Having quick access to your personal schedule right at your fingertips is key to keeping your schedule running smoothly. Of course, I always print out a hard copy and keep it in my bag just in case.

Packing

Shooting a festival is when you will need to pack the most gear. It's essential to be prepared for any type of shooting situation. Not only do you need to be prepared for every type of shooting situation, you also need to be prepared for

Tip: Keeping your eye on music magazines such as SPIN and Rolling Stone a few months ahead of time will help you keep abreast of the up-and-coming acts. Sometimes these acts are booked into the festival before they get really famous, so you may be able to catch a future headliner on a smaller more intimate stage.



4.4 The Bonnaroo Apple iPhone app is a real timesaver. Not only does it allow you to create your own schedule but it also has a map so you can find your way from stage to stage easily.



4.5 *The BlackRapid DR-1 strap, as seen here on live music photographer Amber McConnell, is the best strap that I've found for comfortably carrying two heavy pro cameras all day.*

any type of weather situation. Remember, you'll be outdoors most of the time, and you never know when the weather might change at the drop of a hat. You need to be able to protect yourself and your gear from any type of inclement weather.

Another important consideration to factor in while packing for a festival is sustenance. You will hardly have time to eat or drink for most of the day, so packing some snacks is a good idea, and bringing along a water bottle is imperative. Some festivals will have water available, but a lot of them don't. Staying hydrated on a hot summer day is very important, because you'll be doing a lot of running around and sweating.

Here's a list of what I believe are the most essential pieces of gear to have with you when shooting an outdoor multiday festival. You may or may not need or even use everything in your bag, but it's better to be prepared than to be caught off guard.

- 1. Camera bodies** – Having two camera bodies is ideal, one with a standard zoom lens and one with a telephoto lens. This allows you to quickly switch cameras rather than swapping lenses in the thick of it, and you'll likely be covered in all shooting scenarios. Having two identical bodies or two bodies with the same layout is the best option, so you're not fumbling around looking for buttons when switching between the two. Having a weather-sealed body is highly recommended.
- 2. Lenses** – Carry a minimum of three lenses: an ultra-wide to wide-angle zoom, a standard zoom, and a telephoto zoom. My standard kit consists of a Nikon 14-24mm f/2.8, a Nikon 28-70mm f/2.8, and an 80-200mm f/2.8. With this complement of lenses I'm covered no matter what I run into. In my main camera bag, but not necessarily with me at all times, I also carry a 50mm f/1.4 fast prime for portraits, a fisheye lens for scenic shots and special effects, and a 2X tele-converter in cases where you might have to shoot from the soundboard.
- 3. Laptop computer** – You will invariably need to download and edit your images at various points throughout the festival. I recommend having a fast computer with plenty of RAM so that you don't get bogged down while editing large quantities of files. For the first festival I shot digitally I brought my older backup computer and it wasn't quite up to par, so I spent a lot more time waiting for my files to process than I wanted to. Speed is the key when you're on a deadline. Of course, if you're not on a deadline you may not need a very fast computer. Don't forget to pack your power supply.

- 4. Accessories** – There are lots of smaller accessories you'll need to pack. All of them are pretty important. It's a good idea to make a checklist of these things so you don't accidentally leave anything behind.

Batteries – It's a good idea to have at least two batteries per camera.

Charger – Of course you'll need to charge those batteries.

Memory – Bring enough memory cards to last the whole day if you need to. You'll likely be shooting hundreds if not thousands of images. I bring at least 20GB of memory. Don't forget to bring a card reader as well.

Strap – A comfortable strap is a necessity. The BlackRapid strap seems to be the preferred strap amongst concert photographers today. I use the two-camera version; it's comfortable, doesn't tangle up your cameras, and is extremely quick to use.

Small shoulder bag – A small pouch or bag in which to hold your extra lenses and various other accessories and snacks. I use a military tactical shoulder bag that has various compartments in which to store things. This bag is also equipped with the molle system, which allows you to attach other pouches to it externally if needed. As an added bonus, this bag is also waterproof.

Lens cloth – To keep your lens clean and free of smears and smudges.

Flashlight – Bring a small flashlight to help you see when it gets dark out. It's great for finding things that get dropped in front of a dark stage, and it can help you navigate through a crowd at night.

Rainsleeve – This is a must for every festival photographer's bag. It will allow you to shoot in the rain and can also protect your camera if it's dry and extremely dusty. Op/Tech sells them in packs of two for just around \$6.

Rain poncho – Being caught in a quick downpour isn't much fun, but if you have to shoot all day in the pouring rain, you'll be really glad you brought a rain poncho along.

Hat – A hat is an invaluable piece of equipment when you're out in the sun all day.

Earplugs – This should be standard equipment for every concert photographer. Having suffered minor hearing loss and tinnitus, I am a staunch proponent of hearing protection.

Snacks – It’s important to have a few snacks handy to keep you going through the day; granola bars or some sort of energy bar are great. I also bring some candy along to avoid hypoglycemia. Candy also is a good way to make friends with your fellow photographers. In the summer, carrying around a bottle of water or sports drink is also advisable.



4.6 *Flogging Molly performs here in the pouring rain at Austin City Limits Music Festival 2009. Taken with a Nikon D300s with a Nikon 80-200mm f/2.8D at 145mm (217mm equiv.); ISO 720 for 1/250 at f/2.8, spot metering.*

SHOOTING

As I mentioned previously, when shooting festivals, especially the larger ones, you will run into almost every type of shooting scenario: from daylight shooting, to shooting in the dark with almost no light, to shooting full-on stage production lighting. Your camera settings are likely to be different for every different stage you shoot and will also change as the day progresses and the lighting changes. This isn’t a “set it and forget it” shooting scenario.



4.7 Shooting through smoke adds a cool effect to your shots, such as this one of Jay-Z at Bonnaroo 2010. Taken with a Nikon D700 with a Nikon 80-200mm f/2.8D at 125mm; ISO 640 for 1/250 at f/2.8, spot metering.

Daylight shooting

Shooting in the daylight is usually a very easy option, although there are some pitfalls you should watch for. For the most part you will find that the performers are under cover, the lighting is soft and even, and the stage lighting adds a small bit of color highlights.



4.8 *Nice even lighting makes shooting in the daytime a breeze. Here we have John Gourley of the band Portugal. The Man performing at a small stage at Bonnaroo 2009. Taken with a Nikon D700 with a Nikon 28-70mm f/2.8D at 70mm; ISO 200 for 1/125 at f/2.8, matrix metering.*

Daylight shooting settings are relatively straightforward when the band or performers aren't in direct sunlight. The best option is to use matrix or evaluative metering. Basing your exposure on spot metering can yield very over- or under-exposed images, depending on where you place the spot. Center-weighted metering can work if you are placing your subject directly in the middle of the frame, but if you're composing using the rule of thirds, center-weighted can throw off your exposure.

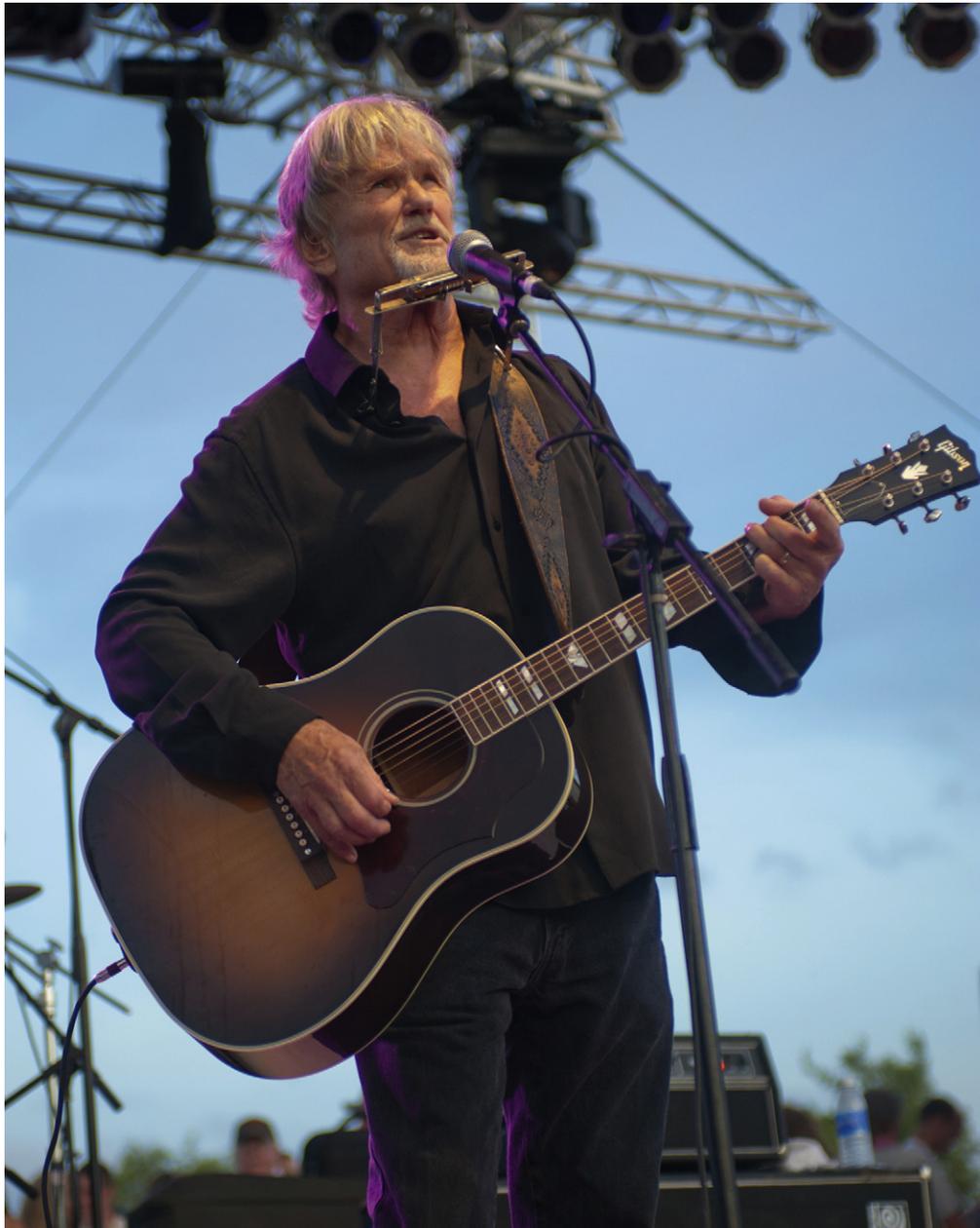
Although shooting in the daylight is great because you get consistent exposure and soft lighting, your images can often come out looking flat and lacking in contrast. You can add contrast by adjusting your in-camera settings, such as Nikon's Picture Controls or Canon's Picture Styles. Keep in mind that if you're shooting RAW you may need to use your camera's proprietary software to apply these changes when opening your RAW files.

Even in daylight when there is plenty of light most photographers still prefer to shoot wide open to get the shallow depth of field that helps to isolate the performers from the background, which is usually more evident in the daylight than it is at night.

One of the major pitfalls when shooting out of doors in the daytime is that once in a while you will have to shoot with direct sunlight shining directly on the performers, which can lead to hotspots (overexposed patches) on your images. In this situation applying some negative exposure compensation can help to keep detail in the bright spots. You may want to set your camera's image review option to display highlight warnings; most cameras are equipped with this feature.

Another thing to look for is backlighting. The sun can sometimes shine into the lens from behind the stage, which can make it difficult to get an accurate meter reading. Switching to spot metering and metering on the performer can help you avoid underexposing the subject. Backlighting isn't necessarily a bad thing; placing your subject between you and the light source can add a nice rim-light effect similar to the lighting technique that portrait and fashion photographers use to help separate the subject from the background.

As with any type of photography, the "golden hour" is one of the best times to get great lighting when shooting during the day. The golden hour is the time right before sunset when the sun is low in the sky, which bathes the performers in a nice golden light. This isn't the most common shooting scenario, but you will run into it from time to time as you progress into shooting festivals and outdoor events.



4.9 Shooting wide open allowed me to blur out some of the distracting features in the background of this shot of Kris Kristofferson at Willie Nelson's 4th of July Picnic 2010. Taken with a Nikon D700 with a Nikon 28-70mm f/2.8D at 65mm; ISO 450 for 1/100 at f/2.8, matrix metering -0.3EV.



4.10 Backlighting provided a rim-light that separated Britt Daniel of the band Spoon from the dark background that could have caused him to blend in. Shot during the Austin City Limits Music Festival 2010. Taken with a Nikon D700 with a Nikon 80-200mm f/2.8D at 200mm; ISO 200 for 1/1600 at f/2.8, spot metering $-0.3EV$.



4.11 French indie rockers Phoenix headlined the last day of Bonnaroo 2010 just as the sun was setting, giving the stage and performers a nice golden glow. Taken with a Nikon D700 with a Nikon 80-200mm f/2.8D at 200mm; ISO 1100 (Auto-ISO) for 1/320 at f/2.8, matrix metering.

Night Shooting

Shooting an outdoor concert at night isn't that far off from any other concert shooting experience. Your settings will largely depend on the lighting setup, the same as any other venue. Smaller festivals tend to have less of a lighting budget than the larger festivals, so you may have to push the limits of your camera when shooting smaller festivals. As usual it's best to have a fast lens.

When shooting the smaller or side stages, you are generally going to encounter lighting similar to what you will find in a bar: a few PAR cans or LED lights. These lights are generally going to be a constant light source, so your settings won't necessarily need to be changed much once you get the exposure in the ballpark. You can use spot or center-weighted metering, depending on how focused the lights are on the performers. Some lights tend to be less diffused

than others, depending on the lamps used in them, and if they are using filters or not. Generally, center-weighted metering is a safe way to go.

As with bar and small club lighting, the highly saturated lighting is going to be one of your biggest obstacles. Refer to Chapter 3 for advice on how to deal with these types of lights.

As you move to shooting the main stages you are going to be dealing with more complex lighting setups. There are lights of every color, and they flash and blink and sweep across the stage. These types of professional stage-lighting setups are very tricky for camera meters, therefore the best way to avoid all of the flashing lights tricking your meter is to use your camera's spot meter. Most current DSLR cameras have the spot metering linked to the active focus point.

The general rule when focusing is to focus on the performer's eyes, usually the one closest to you. This tends to be a good area to meter an exposure reading from as well. This allows you to expose for the most important part of the image, which is the performer.

Sometimes, however, you may find that there is a brighter area on the performer, and you may need to adjust your exposure to help reign in the highlights. This often happens when a performer is wearing a bright white shirt. In this case you can meter on the shirt and use the camera's Auto-Exposure Lock feature, then recompose the image, placing the focus point on the eye but retaining the exposure settings for the bright area of the performer.

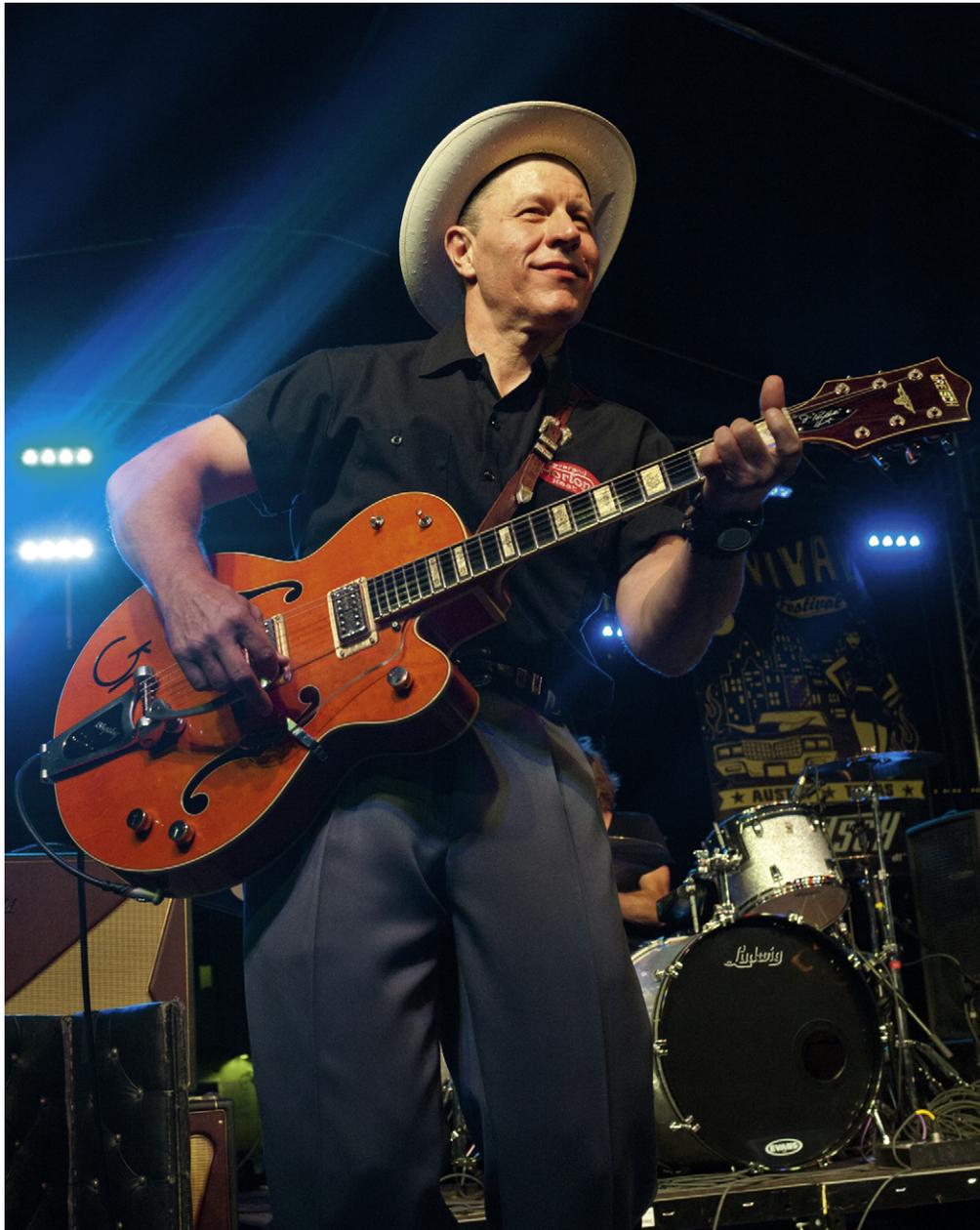


4.12 Spot metering allowed the camera's metering system to ignore the backlight shining into the lens so that I could get the correct exposure for this shot of punk legend and singer for the Descendents, Milo Aukerman. Taken with a Nikon D700 with a Nikon 28-70mm f/2.8D at 52mm; ISO 3200 for 1/125 at f/2.8, spot metering.



4.13 Metering the shirt and recomposing the image allowed me to retain the highlight detail in the white areas that would have been overexposed had I metered from the face. David Byrne at Bonnaroo 2009. Taken with a Nikon D700 with a Nikon 80-200mm f/2.8D at 105mm; ISO 3200 for 1/80 at f/2.8, spot metering.

One of the most common problems that you will encounter when shooting festivals, especially the smaller ones, is that the lighting setups don't have a lot of front spotlights, which really help to light the performer. This can often lead to underexposure and high ISO settings, resulting in somewhat noisier images. Overexposing half to one stop from your meter reading helps to keep detail in the shadow areas.



4.14 *The lack of adequate front lighting necessitated me overexposing the image by one stop. The Reverend Horton Heat performs at the Revival Festival 2011 in Austin, TX. Taken with a Nikon D700 with a Nikon 28-70mm f/2.8D at 42mm; ISO 3200 for 1/250 at f/7.1, spot metering.*

LENS SELECTION

As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, having a variety of lenses is a necessity when shooting a festival. The size of the stages can vary greatly, and not having the right lenses with you will definitely limit your ability to compose properly.

There are three types of lenses you should have in your bag at all times when photographing; an ultra-wide zoom, standard zoom, and telephoto zoom. It's entirely possible to shoot with just the standard zoom and the telephoto zoom, but you must have these two options at the very least to get the job done.

The ultra-wide isn't one of the lenses that you'll find yourself using all the time when shooting a festival, but it's definitely a plus to have one available. When shooting small- to medium-sized stages the photo pits are generally pretty tight. Using the ultra-wide lens allows you to capture shots of the full band when packed in a tight area where you can't back up. On the smaller stages, ultra-wides also allow you to get more creative with your compositions by using the intense distortion that these lenses create.



4.15 I used an ultra-wide lens to add an interesting twist to this photo of the Decemberists at Bonnaroo 2009. Taken with a Nikon D700 with a Nikon 14-24mm f/2.8g at 14mm; ISO 800 for 1/320 at f/2.8, spot metering.

Ultra-wides are also useful when photographing performers on the main stages. The ultra-wide angle of view allows you to create images that fit the whole scene in, which is great for adding perspective to a shot. These lenses are also great for capturing a scene when a good light show is happening: instead of just focusing on the performers you can include the light show, which allows your viewers to feel like they were there.



4.16 Using an ultra-wide lens allowed me to capture the intense stage lights from Phish's performance at Bonnaroo 2009. Taken with a Nikon D700 with a Nikon 14-24mm f/2.8g at 14mm; ISO 360 for 1/125 at f/2.8, spot metering.

The standard zoom is going to be your go-to lens for the smaller to medium stages. The focal length range of these lenses is ideal for capturing a number of different shots. From full to partial band shots or full-length body shots, to close-ups at the longer end. The wide-angle setting isn't going to give you quite the same effect as the ultra-wide but will get you in the ballpark. On the main stages you can use the standard zoom to get full band and stage shots.



4.17 A standard zoom lens is perfect for capturing shots on the small to medium stages. Here Ben Nichols of the alt-country band Lucero performs at Fun Fun Fun Fest 2009 in Austin, TX. Taken with a Nikon D700 with a Nikon 48-70mm f/2.8D at 45mm; ISO 1800 for 1/200 at f/2.8, spot metering.

The telephoto lens is an absolute necessity when shooting the larger main stages. Most of the time the stages are about 15 feet high. Using a telephoto and backing up in the pit is the only way to get a good perspective of the performer; trying to stand up close to the stage and shoot upwards with your standard zoom lens will result in a lot of “up the nose” shots. On the smaller stages the telephoto is great for getting those close-up shots.



4.18 Using a telephoto was a necessity when photographing the Avett Brothers on the main stage at the Austin City Limits Music Festival. Taken with a Nikon D300s with a Nikon 80-200mm f/2.8D at 105mm (157mm equiv.); ISO 200 for 1/1250 at f/2.8, matrix metering.

CAPTURING THE ATMOSPHERE

One thing to remember when shooting a festival is to capture the scenery. Festivals are always a good time for catching a party atmosphere. There are usually lots of interesting people doing any number of fun things. Look for people enjoying the music, interacting with their friends or even the performers; in short, look for general revelry. Don't be afraid to approach people and ask them to pose for you.



4.19 I caught this family as they were heading home on the final day of the Austin City Limits Music Festival 2009. Taken with a Nikon D700 with a Zenitar 16mm f/2.8; ISO 500 for 1/60 at f/5.6, matrix metering.



4.20 After two days of torrential downpours, the entire Austin City Limits festival grounds were covered in mud. This kid decided it would be fun to roll around in it. Taken with a Nikon D700 with a Nikon 80-200mm f/2.8D at 200mm; ISO 200 for 1/400 at f/2.8, spot metering.

Another thing to photograph is the scenery and the festival grounds. Festivals usually have more than just music going on. There are often art installations and other fun things that will help you to portray the festival theme. Inclement weather can play a role in the overall scenery and atmosphere of the event as well, so don't forget to include some scenic shots of the festival, especially if the weather turns nasty. A few years ago it rained heavily for two days during the Austin City Limits Music Festival, turning the whole place into a mud pit, and some of my favorite scenic shots are from this part of the event.



4.21 The Bonnaroo ferris wheel is one of their iconic structures. Using a fisheye lens allowed me to get a cool perspective. Taken with a Nikon D700 with a Nikon 16mm f/2.8; ISO 200 for 1/2000 at f/5.6, spot metering.
