

# TASMANIAN

BE TASMANIAN PODCAST

## Episode One: Different is good

*(Be Tasmanian Podcast—theme music)*

*Welcome to Be Tasmanian, a podcast about an impossible mission in a small state at the bottom of the world.*

*It's about uncovering a hidden story that unites people, and using that story to inspire community action.*

*It's about place-branding, destination marketing and economic development, but it's really about culture: It's about who we are, why we live where we live, what all that means, and what we ought to do about it.*

*This is episode one.*

*(Be Tasmanian Podcast theme music)*

At the end of February, in this awful year of 2020, the accidental father of modern place-branding—Red Wassenich—died of a respiratory illness.

I think of Red all the time, though I never got to meet him.

His accidental invention of place-branding, happened twenty years ago, in the year 2000. Red, a librarian, called in to a radio show in his hometown of Austin, Texas. Now Austin wasn't doing so well at the time, and Red wanted to whisper encouragement to people like him, people who felt they understood what was special about this odd capital city in the middle of the most conservative state in America.

Red didn't call in to the radio show to say this, exactly, he had not practiced the words, but he said they had to fight—in these troubled times—to keep Austin weird.

And immediately it felt right, here's Red looking back:

*"And so I called in to make a donation and the person said "well why are you donating to this show?" and I said "Well it helps keep Austin weird." And a little click in my head and so I mentioned it to my wife and said "I like this phrase" and she said "well let's get bumper stickers" so she did and I got the website and it very, very slowly took off."*

Keep Austin Weird.

Red never trademarked the phrase, and in time the independent business association just started using it.

*"Most people, likely think of the phrase as primarily a marketing phrase, which hadn't crossed my mind when creating it," said Red. "I certainly endorse the buy-local movement and I'm proud it helped, but my perspective comes from a street-level fondness for goofy, anachronistic, unserious, unmaterialistic bohemianism. Also from my inflated ego."*

While it sounds like a marketing line now, it's really just a David and Goliath story in miniature. Austin's music scene, its cathedral of garbage, its barbecue joints, its artists and small businesspeople were threatened by the giant, grey, multinational forces of globalisation. Wal-Mart, Home Depot, and the growing suburban donut around the city was making Austin feel like everywhere else. This was a problem the people of Austin could solve together.

Red defined the city's culture, its unique assets, as weirdness. He asked his neighbours to join him in protecting it.

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The entrepreneurs owned the story and made it their own. A modest festival born of the city's music industry, South by Southwest, took it on and slowly expanded into the number one festival of creativity in the world. Small tech start-ups that felt weird moved in. Then bigger companies, who wanted to be close to all this scrappy weirdness, joined them. The airport, the university, eventually even city council took it on—not as marketing but as a call to action.

What are YOU doing to keep Austin weird?

Of course, not everything in Austin is weird. The city still has NASCAR and way too many pickup trucks. And as Red said, the journey from the fourth largest city in Texas to the fastest-growing city in America took a long time. But in the competition for talented people and capital, this was the way for an often-forgotten mid-sized city with challenging weather to stand out.

Keep Austin Weird was a bottom up expression of local, spiritual truth and pride that, eventually, met with top-down decision-making. The city manager Marc Ott, from the growth years of 2008 to 2016, would say: *When I have to make a hard decision I just have to ask myself: "will this keep us weird or not?"*

This is what we mean by place-branding, and those of us who do it don't even like the word 'branding'. It isn't a logo. It isn't a marketing line. It's a unifying cultural expression that locals believe, and feel, a source of local confidence, even tension... there are, of course, Keep Austin Normal T-shirts.

But, most importantly, the story inspires action. Locals build more weirdness, bake it into what they do. And it's a way to identify your audiences: your customers, tourists, talented people, investors, and students.

You like weird? Join us.

## *(Be Tasmanian Podcast theme music)*

My name is Todd Babiak and I've devoted my career to working with developments, neighbourhoods, cities, states, and countries to unearth and activate what Red Wassenich did by accident.

If you don't know what place-branding is, don't worry: this podcast is your initiation ritual.

What I love about place-branding is that it's so much harder, and so much more rewarding, than product branding. Collections of people can't be packaged like toothpaste. Humans are flawed. They will contradict themselves. Democracy can be messy. And this work can't just be about making the successful people marginally more successful. You want to uplift and include as many people as possible. Place-branding is economic and social development, driven by local culture, and when it works, it changes everything.

I romanticise what Red did in Texas, but there are a lot of articles in the Austin newspapers about how the city's economic growth, through weirdness, destroyed its weirdness. Red himself questioned it:

*"I had to make a point of, ah, not sitting there and just complaining about 'oh back Austin used to be more ...'you know, the whole slogan 'keep Austin weird' has a certain nostalgic negativity to it almost you know, it's like 'it used to be better' umm, which of course I think is true."*

We do have to think about economic growth, but place-branding is spiritual. It's about who we are and how we feel. Where we choose to live and raise our children, to be a neighbour, to invest time and money and our life's energy is deeply meaningful. When we get this wrong, or when we are lazy about it, when we resort to clichés and randomness and cute tactics we don't just fail in our work.

We hurt people.

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When you care deeply about place-branding, it haunts you when you see places doing it badly just because they have been sold snake-oil, or in that classic Simpson's episode, a monorail.

Big consulting companies will give a city or a state or a country a big, fat strategic plan filled with a mission, a vision, and values that nearly any place could use. Usually it's one hundred pages long, with small type, lots of copying and pasting, and colourful charts. It costs hundreds of thousands of dollars, but neither the leaders nor the locals use it. Thanks, consulting company.

Advertising agencies will charge even more to give you a new logo, tagline, and media campaign every few years and call it a brand... but it's nearly always something any place could say. You've seen the welcome signs. You've watched the videos of young people drinking in clubs, good-looking families walking down paths, scientists doing things in labs... it's the best place to live, work, and play!

What Red showed us, in Austin, is that true place-branding is all about being specific. It's about asking hard questions: who are we and what feels like it can only happen here? The answer is a unifying cultural expression, a strategy to bring it to life, and the courage to act.

The answer always begins with a story.

## *(Be Tasmanian Podcast theme music)*

Seventeen years after Red called his local radio station, a guy from the Tasmanian Government sent me a note about his state's brand.

It's relevant that when I first saw the word Tasmania, on the computer screen of my office in Canada, I thought of a spinning cartoon character. Then for a moment I thought of Africa. No, I confirmed, Tasmania—not Tanzania.

Also relevant, and shameful: at the time I did not know that Tasmania had anything to do with Australia.

A brand, any brand, is about an emotional reaction. If our emotional reaction is strong enough, we'll do something about it.

Well six months later, after a punishing trip through China, I was about to land in Tasmania. I had done place branding work in a bunch of places, but before I arrived I was always terrified. I was going to do what we always did: work with local partners on a series of one-on-one interviews, with a representative sample of people, to answer the question why.

Why Tasmania?

It had worked well in other places but... what if it didn't work in Tasmania? I looked down from the airplane window: the sea, the mountains, a long beach in front of the airport bordered by the Southern Ocean, a moody bank of clouds with an orange and pink splash of sunlight, eucalyptus trees. It matched the pictures I had seen, the videos I had watched.

Tasmania was epically beautiful. But I knew that already.

The hard part was uncovering what this place meant to the people who choose to live here, who choose to stay. What were they most proud of? Least proud of? What were specific, very specific and very human examples of Tasmania at its best?

What would absolutely break your heart if you had to leave?

In other places I had worked, I had heard powerful answers to these questions. What if, in Tasmania, people had nothing to say? What if they answered with yeses and nos, and could not tell authentic and specific stories of this place and its success, its struggles? What if they were distrustful of me, and my bad accent, and found the whole exercise a waste of time?

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I had read about a tagline people used in Tasmania: clean and green. Lots of places around the world used the phrase, or had used it in the past: New Zealand, Punjab, environmentally-friendly janitorial services. It wasn't culturally specific, but maybe people would didn't want to talk about that. What if they thought I was here to change something, instead of identifying what was already here and turning it up, as the poet says, to eleven?

*(Be Tasmanian Podcast theme music)*

It was a Saturday. The meetings with the team and the interviews would begin on Monday. And, what was before us: in total, two years and 450 hour-long individual interviews with wealthy Tasmanians, not-so-wealthy Tasmanians, men and women young and old from the cities of Hobart and Launceston, Burnie and Devonport, from the east coast, the west coast, the midlands, King Island, Flinders Island, new arrivals, sixth-generation Tasmanians, aboriginal Tasmanians.

In the first few minutes of the first few interviews, people talked about friendliness, the proximity to nature, mountains and the sea, their families, their communities, their commutes ... it's strange to sit and answer these questions across the table from a relentless foreigner. They were nervous. They said what everyone said, about everywhere, so I was getting nervous too.

The magic, in place brand research, is always in the examples, in the stories that illustrate what makes a place different. And from the first day of our interviews we began to hear it.

There was something different about this place, Tasmania.

Two examples came up several times on the first day. One was an acronym for a museum, and one was a woman.

I was so new here, and so ignorant of the size and power of this organisation and this woman, my interviewees must have thought I was profoundly dumb. But it helped to open them up. They could educate the foreigner, see the magic in things they saw every day and simply accepted, and it didn't matter if they had the dates and facts correct, we were working in the realm of narrative and mythology. I wanted to know the whole story of this museum, and this woman, what made them particularly Tasmanian.

*(Be Tasmanian Podcast theme music)*

Once, there was a girl who grew up in the North West Tasmanian town of Smithton. It wasn't easy for her, for lots of reasons. She had four siblings and there wasn't much money. She didn't know it at the time but she was autistic and a lesbian, and the 1980s were not an ideal time to grow up different in Tasmania. The laws were regressive. People on the mainland of Australia made fun of Tasmanians, called them two headed—and incest joke. And Tasmanians made it worse by being cruel to each other. But the girl, Hannah Gadsby, grew up and did not give up. She responded to the hardship with humour, though not just any humour. It was humour tinged with darkness and extreme honesty. She got better, and so did Tasmania. Transforming from the worst place to be gay or lesbian to being one of the best, through brave legislation.

And it wasn't enough for Hannah Gadsby to be a successful stand-up comedian, she reinvented stand-up comedy. She's so Tasmanian.

Once there was a boy named David Walsh, who grew up in what was then a tough part of Hobart's northern suburbs. He had a mind for math and studied it, along with computer science, for a while at the University of Tasmania. Then he took his passion for numbers, and systems, and applied it to gambling, horse racing and other sports. Soon, the boy who grew up poor wasn't poor at all. He made a bit of money, then a lot of money. David could have moved to a mansion in Sydney, or a penthouse in New York City. Instead he focused on Tasmania and purchased a historic winery not far from the neighbourhood of his childhood. And even though everyone told him he was mad, that no one would come to it, that he would be mocked and humiliated, he built a very particular private museum for his growing collection of mysterious "oddities" MONA. The Museum of Old and New Art.

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When it opened, David expected his neighbours to be horrified, instead they loved it. And understood he had discovered something intensely Tasmanian in his museum of sex and death. So Tasmanian.

While MONA is big and Hannah Gadsby is a global star, Tasmanians talked about them as though they were just small and special. They talked about how hard Hannah and David had worked, how they were just regular fiercely passionate people. They talked about how everyone had told them it wouldn't work: you can't build something extraordinary. Not here. Yet they had. And every story I heard that week, and in the weeks and months that followed, had a similar arc. Stories about people who started businesses, environmental movements, festivals, social ventures, and careers in the arts. Whether they travelled the world, or more likely, stayed small and special, was similar. I heard it again and again, that's so Tasmanian.

What does it mean to be Tasmanian? That's the question we're going to explore in this podcast, through the voices and stories of individual Tasmanians, and through our impossible mission to tie it all together into something unified, something coherent, something we hope you'll want to be a part of. To join us check out [www.tasmanian.com.au](http://www.tasmanian.com.au) and take a few minutes to sign up as a partner.

*(Be Tasmanian Podcast theme music)*

Hey, if you have questions about what you heard today about me, or the team, or Brand Tasmania, send us an email at [podcast@brandtasmania.com.au](mailto:podcast@brandtasmania.com.au).