When bloodshot-eyed young rock and roll fans trip through the years into their forties, they lose the interest, the opportunity, and even the stamina to pay attention to new music, go to shows, and hit the road to music festivals. Right? Wrong! Just ask Jim Lenahan and Patrick Foster of USA Today’s “Dad Rocks” podcast.

In March, Lenahan and Foster went on a 10-day sonic odyssey from the Washington, D.C., area, through hallowed music-history sites in Nashville and Memphis and late-night clubbing in Dallas, and waded ears-open into the screaming Stratocaster of Austin’s South by Southwest (SXSW) festival. And they even put a vintage Airstream into the middle of the mix.

Lenahan, a senior editor at USA Today, and Foster, the general manager of its College section, talked a lot about their love of music around the office, and the paper warmed to the idea of them hosting a weekly podcast. The show has been running for more than a year and is still rocking.

“We’re both guys who still have a passion for music, new and old,” says Lenahan. “And what we have found is that there are others like us out there—other people who don’t outgrow wanting to listen to music and go to shows.”

Foster chimes in with the “Dad” element: “Music has also been an important element in the raising of our children. Jim listens to a lot of music around the house with his kids. My middle offspring has a radio show and my older son is really into vinyl. So that’s an important element: We both actively engage with our kids around music,” he says.

The Airstream rolled into the picture when Mike Snider, a USA Today reporter, suggested pairing the road trip/mobile recording concept with saving money by renting an RV. Making that rental an Airstream was a no-brainer.

“The Airstream played into that whole idea of rock and roll and music — it has a certain cool factor. It played into the idea that if we go to cities like Nashville, there’s a lot we’re going to delve into there that goes back to the roots of rock and roll and classic rock. The vintage nature of the Airstream really fits in with that,” says Lenahan.

The trailer, a 1964 27-foot Overlander named “Lucy,” was restored by owner Michael Vallen of Nomad Mobile Motor Lodge to period fittings — along with some modern touches, like a good sound system, helpful for rocking dads.
“We really loved the fact that it was restored right down to 1964, including some Life magazines from that time that were actually in this trailer, which was fantastic,” says Foster. “What a neat vehicle! When we pulled into the campgrounds in Nashville, we knew that we had something really different — it got a lot of attention,” he says.

Lenahan and Patrick spent most of the trip’s nights in the Airstream, while Snider and Steve Elfers, USA Today’s director of video, helped with driving, towing, and trip logistics. “I found that the Airstream was so comfortable, once I had my spot I had no real interest in giving it up. I was just like, ‘I’m fine. I’ll stay here and you guys can take the hotel. I got my bed,’” says Lenahan.

The two didn’t do any cooking in the trailer because it was filled with recording gear. And, after all, they had to rock. “We were probably out most evenings past midnight, at least,” says Foster. “In many cases we came back and used the Airstream to record our nightly wrap-up. We also did a few interviews right outside the trailer, which was great,” he says.

Their trip was a fantasyland of musical past and musical present, taking them from famous music studios to music museums to local band performances to national band performances, and many experiences stood out.

“My favorite thing that we saw had to be the Sam Phillips recording studio in Memphis, where we got a tour by Jerry Phillips,” says Lenahan. “To meet the son of the man who invented rock and roll — that’s just amazing, and he couldn’t be a nicer guy. Then to tour the recording studio and see that it’s still kept mostly the way Sam Phillips left it was really an amazing experience.”

Foster had great moments in Memphis too, interviewing Big Star’s drummer and touring the famed Ardent Studios but, he says, “What to me really encapsulates the whole trip was when we recorded a podcast about road trip songs while we were driving on the road. Steve Elfers had rigged the truck with an eight-prong outlet coming out of the dashboard where our stuff was plugged in. So we had all of the recording equipment, everybody was wearing microphones, I was playing the music while Jim was driving, and we literally were talking about road trip songs. That to me was probably the most special highlight.”

Both men saw a lot of contemporary and alternative music at SXSW and much of it they liked and will listen to again. As Lenahan says, “Our tastes and interests are really broad, and our appetite for music is just, what’s the word, insatiable.”

Though their mutual favorite band is The Replacements, both return to classic mainstays when they need a boost. “When I feel like I just need a pick-me-up in...
life or I need that comfort-food kind of moment, it’s probably going to be Springsteen,” says Lenahan. “There is just something that will instantly make me feel better if I put a Bruce Springsteen record on.”

Foster also pulls from time’s deep record bin with his choice. “The music of the early Who takes me back to a place and time in my life where I was really beginning to discover all the different possibilities that music held, and that’s probably the music that I would return to,” he says.

Their trip took them many miles, over which they recorded 22 podcasts, made videos, wrote articles, and pushed out a lot of social media updates. “It was a big turning point for ‘Dad Rock.’ We got a lot of fans on that trip and kind of blew up the possibilities of what a podcast could be. So we were really proud of it. And we survived! Our whole bodies made it through the whole trip — barely,” Foster says.

Which proves there’s something restorative about sleeping in a 1964 Airstream.

Learn more about Dad Rock at dadrock.usatoday.com