SXSW keeps growing

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The huge conference room at Austin's Convention Center was packed to the gills when the creators of the hit HBO TV series Westworld took the stage on March 10, day two of the South by Southwest (SXSW) 2018 festival.  
On stage were director Jonathan Nolan, producer Lisa Joy and four cast members of the futuristic sci-fi drama about a Wild West-themed amusement park staffed by androids run amok.  
The audience was treated to footage of the yet unreleased Westworld: Season II. Toward the end of the following discussion, Nolan started to talk about artificial intelligence applications more optimistic than the bleak, dystopian vision of Westworld — things like space programs and a certain red car.  
Suddenly there was a buzz in the air and lo and behold, Elon Musk walked onto the stage. The audience erupted in cheers as smartphones popped above heads to capture the moment.  
"There are a lot of negative things in the world all the time," Musk began without any introduction or greeting. "There are lots of problems that need to get solved, lots of things that are miserable and kind of get you down.  
"But life can't be about solving one miserable problem after another, we need things that inspire you, that's why we did this," Musk told the audience, referring to his recent Space X rocket launch.  
Musk quoted a Russian scientist: "Earth is the cradle of humanity, but you cannot stay in the cradle forever", and continued, "It's time to go forth and start another star-faring civilization, be out there among the stars, expand the scope and scale of human consciousness. That makes me glad to be alive. I hope you all feel the same way."  
A Q&A session with Musk was staged the next day at the fully-packed Moody Theater. For an hour, Musk shared his vision of the future, talking about space travel, colonizing Mars and the danger of uncontrolled AI development.  
When the talk ended, his brother Kimbal Musk joined him on stage carrying a guitar. Together in cowboy hats, they sang the duet My Little Buttercup.  
Musk's appearances summed up what SXSW is all about: the convergence of high-technology, music and film.  
This year, more than 400,000 people from around the world jammed downtown Austin for 10 days starting March 8. More than 3,000 talks on a wide range of topics were presented. Besides Musk, other prominent speakers included Bernie Sanders, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Melinda Gates and Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar.  
Many companies set up interactive displays to show off their latest gizmos. One could find a 3D-printed house model from ICON, an AI dog from Sony and a Mercedes-Benz's smartcar. The examples were endless.  
Originally started in 1987 as a regional music festival by a few staffers at the Austin Chronicle newspaper, the first SXSW attracted about 700 attendants.  
The name South by Southwest (SXSW) was a play on Alfred Hitchcock's classic thriller North by Northwest, referring to Austin's location on the map.  
Its influence grew by the year. In 1994, film and multimedia were added. Eventually, SXSW was divided into three major components: music, film and interactive, which focus on emerging technology.  
SXSW Music is considered the largest musical festival in the world, with more than 2,000 performances by musicians from the world over.  
A handful of Chinese musicians joined the festival this year: Fazi, a post-punk / indie-rock band from Xi'an; Ruby Fatale, an audio/visual experimental band from Taiwan; Beijing-based electronic musician Shao; punk band SUBS; and Second Hand Rose, which is known for combining Chinese and Western sounds.  
The groups appeared together on China Night on March 15.  
Close to 140 feature films and 170 short films were screened this year, with 89 world premieres. Among them were the Chinese documentary People's Republic of Desires directed by Wu Hao, which won the Grand Jury Award.  
SXSW Interactive has become an incubator for new ideas and technologies. Speakers, meet-ups and start-up accelerators attract big corporations, inventors, entrepreneurs and investors from around the world.  
AI continued to dominate SXSW 2018 tech talk with more than 100 different presentations. The other hot topic was blockchains with about 50 discussions.  
Austin has grown with SXSW as well, from the 42nd largest city in the US in 1987 to the 11th largest city today, according to Austin Mayor Steve Adler.  
Despite its growing size, SXSW remains the same in spirit, Adler said. "It's still about the incredibly creative artists and innovative filmmakers trying to find managers and distributors, except now they are called venture capitalists.  
"SXSW is where good ideas come to become real. It's the World's Fair of the future, with the highest concentration of innovators and creators in the world," Alder concluded.

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