

Robert Earl Keen

"The road goes on forever ..."

It's not always easy to sum up a career - let alone a life's ambition - so succinctly, but those five words from Robert Earl Keen's calling-card anthem just about do it. You can complete the lyric with the next five words - the ones routinely shouted back at Keen by thousands of fans a night ("and the party never ends!") - just to punctuate the point with a flourish, but it's the part about the journey that gets right to the heart of what makes Keen tick. Some people take up a life of playing music with the goal of someday reaching a destination of fame and fortune; but from the get-go, Keen just wanted to write and sing his own songs, and to keep writing and singing them for as long as possible.

"I always thought that I wanted to play music, and I always knew that you had to get some recognition in order to continue to play music," Keen says. "But I never thought of it in terms of getting to be a big star. I thought of it in terms of having a really, really good career and writing some good songs, and getting onstage and having a really good time."

Now three-decades on from the release of his debut album - with eighteen other records to his name, thousands of shows under his belt and still no end in sight to the road ahead - Keen remains as committed to and inspired by his muse as ever. And as for accruing recognition, well, he's done alright on that front, too; from his humble beginnings on the Texas folk scene, he's blazed a peer, critic, and fan-lauded trail that's earned him living-legend (not to mention pioneer) status in the Americana music world. And though the Houston native has never worn his Texas heart on his sleeve, he's long been regarded as one of the Lone Star State's finest (not to mention top-drawing) true singer-songwriters. He was still a relative unknown in 1989 when his third studio album, *West Textures*, was released - especially on the triple bill he shared at the time touring with legends Townes Van Zandt and Guy Clark - but once fellow Texas icon Joe Ely recorded both "The Road Goes on Forever" and "Whenever Kindness Fails" on his 1993 album, *Love and Danger*, the secret was out on Keen's credentials as a songwriter's songwriter. By the end of the decade, Keen was a veritable household name in Texas, headlining a millennial New Year's Eve celebration in Austin that drew an estimated 200,000 people. A dozen years later, he was inducted into the Texas Heritage Songwriters Hall of Fame along with the late, great Van Zandt and his longtime friend from Texas A & M, Lyle Lovett.

The middle child of a geologist father and an attorney mother, Keen was weaned on classic rock (in particular, the psychedelic blues trio Cream) and his older brother's Willie Nelson records - but it was his younger sister's downtown Houston celebrity status as a "world-champion foosball player" that exposed him to the area's acoustic folk scene. By the time he started working on his English degree at Texas A&M, he was teaching himself guitar and setting his poetic musings to song. That in turn led to a college fling with a bluegrass ensemble (featuring his childhood friend Bryan Duckworth, who would continue to play fiddle with Keen well into the '90s) and front-porch picking parties with fellow Aggie Lovett at Keen's rental house - salad days captured in spirit on the Keen/Lovett co-write, "The Front Porch Song," which both artists would eventually record on their respective debut albums.

While Lovett's self-titled debut was released on major-label Curb Records, Keen took the road less travelled, self-financing and producing 1984's *No Kinda Dancer* and leasing it to the independent label Rounder Records, which issued it on its Philo imprint. "It was difficult, because I didn't know what I was doing ... I literally opened up the phonebook and looked for studios," Keen recalls. "I basically put it all together through brute force and ignorance, but I was shocked with how well it worked out and very happy with it. We had a release party at Butch Hancock's Dixie Bar and Bustop, and Lyle and Nanci Griffith and a lot of those people who were a part of the Austin folkie scene came out."

Keen himself had already started to make quite a name for himself on that scene, thanks to four years of constant regional gigging and winning the Kerrville Folk Festival's prestigious New Folk songwriting competition in 1983. After his debut's release, he began touring more and more outside of the state lines, eventually moving to Nashville in 1986. Keen's stint in Music City, U.S.A., lasted just under two years, but he returned to Texas armed with a publishing deal, a new label (another indie, Sugar Hill), and a national booking agent. He closed the decade with 1988's *The Live Album* and the following year's *West Textures*, the album that marked the debut of "The Road Goes on Forever" and, not inconsequentially, kicked his career into high gear.

With hindsight, Keen admits he no idea at the time of writing it that his song about a couple of ill-fated lovers running afoul of the law would have the legs it did, but he readily points to the forward thinking of DJ Steve Coffman of San Antonio radio station KRIO for helping to start the fire. "He talked the station into doing sort of a free-form programming format, basically anything he liked, which turned out to be some Texas music along with a lot of cool sort of pop music," he says. "So all of a sudden, I heard my song back-to-back with the Sheryl Crow song that was popular at the time, and that was the first time that I really felt like I was a real part of the music business, despite having been in it already for a pretty long time. And right after that, I went to a show in San Antonio and there were 1,500 people there - whereas up to that point I'd been playing to, max, maybe 150. That was the real ah-hah moment for me that really got me going and kept me going, because before that I'd been doing this for eight or 10 years and had a lot of rejection but very little success."

After that, though, success came in spades. Although he continued to steer clear of the Garth Brooks-dominated waters of the country mainstream, the perfect storm of Keen's literate song craft, razor wit and killer band (more on that in a bit) stirred up a grassroots sensation in Texas not seen since the '70s heyday of maverick "outlaw country" upstarts Willie, Waylon, and Jerry Jeff Walker. Armed with two more albums (1993's *A Bigger Piece of Sky* and '94's *Gringo Honeymoon*) brimming with instant classics like "Corpus Christi Bay," "Whenever Kindness Fails," "Gringo Honeymoon," "Dreadful Selfish Crime" and "Merry Christmas From the Family," he began packing dancehalls, roadhouses, theaters, and festival grounds with diverse crowds of rowdy college kids, serious singer-songwriter fans and plenty of folks who, like Keen himself, had been around the Texas music scene long enough to remember Willie's earliest 4th of July Picnics. And the phenomenon was not confined to the Texas state lines. Famed producer and pedal steel ace Lloyd Maines (Joe Ely, Terry Allen) helped Keen and his band bottle lightning on 1996's *No. 2 Live Dinner*, a next-best-thing-to-being-there concert document that remains one of Keen's best-selling albums, and the burgeoning Americana music scene (bolstered by AAA radio stations across the country and magazines like

No Depression) embraced Keen as one of its prime movers. In the wake of albums like 1997's *Picnic* and '98's *Walking Distance* (both released on major-label Arista), one would have been hard-pressed to tell the difference between a rabid Robert Earl Keen crowd at Texas' legendary Gruene Hall and those at New York City joints like Tramps and the Bowery Ballroom. Little wonder, then, that when the songwriter-revering "Americana" style was officially recognized by the industry 1998, Keen was the genre's first artist to be featured on the cover of the radio trade magazine *Gavin*.

The '90s may have been a boom period for Keen, but his momentum hasn't ebbed a bit since the turn of the century - nor has his pursuit of continued growth as a writer and artist. If anything, his output from the last decade has been marked by some of the most adventurous music of his career. "Wild Wind," an unforgettable highlight from *Gravitational Forces*, his Gurf Morlix-produced 2001 debut for the Nashville-based Americana label Lost Highway, captured the character (and characters) of a small Texas town with a cinematic eye reminiscent of *The Last Picture Show*; but the album's title track also found Keen wryly experimenting with spacey, beatnik jazz. For the freewheelin', freak-flag-flying *Farm Fresh Onions* (2003, Audium/Koch), Keen and producer Rich Brotherton (his longtime guitarist) took the band into the proverbial garage to knock out their most rocking set of songs to date - most notably the psychedelic rave-up of the title track. Brotherton also produced the more rootsy but equally playful *What I Really Mean* (2005, E1 Music), but Lloyd Maines was back at the helm for 2009's eclectic *The Rose Hotel* and 2011's spirited *Ready for Confetti* (both released by Lost Highway). The later was especially well received by fans and critics alike, with *AllMusic*'s Thom Jurek raving, "Ready for Confetti is, without question, Keen's most inspired and focused project in nearly 20 years." His latest project released in 2015, "Happy Prisoner: The Bluegrass Sessions" was a straight-ahead "love postcard to bluegrass". This was something Keen had wanted to do for a long time and it was now or never. Keen is ranked *Billboard*'s No. 2, 2015 Bluegrass Artist of the year. His current recording, *Happy Prisoner: The Bluegrass Sessions*, charted as 2015's Top 5 album at Americana Radio and *Billboard*'s 2015 No. 2 album on the Bluegrass Albums chart.

Earlier this year, Keen played three weeks of sold-out theater dates with Lyle Lovett, just two longtime college friends swapping songs on acoustic guitars like they used to do on Keen's front porch in College Station. But the lion's share of his concert schedule still finds him playing full-tilt with his seasoned road and studio band: Brotherton on guitar, Bill Whitbeck on bass, Tom Van Schaik on drums, and Marty Muse on steel guitar. "I've been with this band for 20 years now," Keen says proudly. "I used to think that was just sort of an interesting fact, but now it's almost a total anomaly - that just doesn't happen much. I always felt like once you lock into the right bunch of people, you try to do the best by them that you can. So we've been able to stay together a long time, and I think one thing that makes it worthwhile for people to come see us as an act is the fact that it's not like we're trying to work it all out onstage - we've already worked everything out."

REK has had the honor of working with music legends Dave Matthews, Bonnie Raitt, Sheryl Crow, Eric Church, Gary Clark, Jr. among others. He was inducted into the Texas Heritage Songwriters Hall of Fame in 2012. In March 2015, Robert Earl Keen was recognized as the first recipient of BMI's official Troubadour Award. Keen is an active member of NARAS and was invited to be a participant in the prestigious "Grammys On The Hill" where he sang the National Anthem at the opening ceremony and was a member

of the delegation that lobbied US Congress to support musicians' rights, specifically the "Fair Pay for Fair Play Act".

But the road goes on and on, with no time for resting on laurels. Not that Keen's complaining. "I had a relatively open schedule for 2016 back at the beginning of the year, but it has just filled in like you wouldn't believe," he marvels during a rare day off in Kerrville, Texas (where he lives with his wife and two daughters). "I've broke my record this year - I've packed for five trips at one time, because I wasn't going to be starting any of them in the same place. It's been crazy!

It isn't always easy being Robert Earl Keen, but somebody's got to do it. And now more than ever, he's up to the task and loving every minute of it.