

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES: ROBERT EARL KEEN AND THE ORIGINS OF
THE TEXAS COUNTRY MUSIC SCENE

by

Richard Kelly, B.A.

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Council of
Texas State University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

with a Major in History

August 2017

Committee Members:

Gary Hartman, Chair

Jason Mellard

Dan K. Utley

COPYRIGHT

by

Richard Kelly

2017

FAIR USE AND AUTHOR'S PERMISSION STATEMENT

Fair Use

This work is protected by the Copyright Laws of the United States (Public Law 94-553, section 107). Consistent with fair use as defined in the Copyright Laws, brief quotations from this material are allowed with proper acknowledgement. Use of this material for financial gain without the author's express written permission is not allowed.

Duplication Permission

As the copyright holder of this work I, Richard Kelly, authorize duplication of this work, in whole or in part, for educational or scholarly purposes only.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to anyone who has, or anyone who will in the future, put me on the guest list.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In 1992, during my second year of college, I would occasionally tag along with Mike Kilian, a high school friend, to his Alpha Tau Omega parties just west of the campus of the University of Texas at Austin. Not knowing many people, I usually ended up watching the band. This is how I first heard and met Jack Ingram, a fledgling performer and SMU ATO. At the time, none of us could know Ingram was a harbinger of a generation of Texas musicians who, inspired by Robert Earl Keen, would lead a resurgence of interest in original, Texas country music, an echo of the progressive country of the music of Ingram's, Kilian's, and my childhood.

In 1997, having won the job of broadcasting football games at Texas State University in San Marcos, I was ordered to take a weekly shift playing music on KTSW, the campus radio station. Seeing the growing crowds and rabid enthusiasm at Ingram's and Keen's shows, I wondered aloud why this music, popular with the college crowd, was not played on the college radio station. For my grouching, I was rewarded with a two-hour block on Sunday nights playing Ingram, Keen, and whoever I decided were their peers and influences. Artists such as Jerry Jeff Walker, Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash, Chris Wall, Lyle Lovett, and Steve Earle filled out my original playlist. Three days after my first show, Greg Henry, an ambitious young entrepreneur, sent a press kit introducing me to Pat Green, who became a regular in my rotation. Soon, Cory Morrow, who Kilian and I discovered while chasing two-dollar longnecks at Pete's Peanut Bar and Piano

Emporium on Austin's Sixth Street, released an EP I worked into the show. This amateurish, constantly evolving radio program possibly represents the first attempt to define the genre that came to be called Texas Country. In 1999, I talked Chris Knight, program director at Austin's Lone Star 93.3, into playing Green, Morrow, and other early Texas Country pioneers in regular rotation. Knight also approved a Sunday night show produced and hosted by myself along with Pat Green and others. Knight's decision to title the show "Inside Texas Country" helped to name the genre.

I would like to thank Michael Kilian, Chris Knight, Cory Morrow, and Pat Green for their roles in introducing me to this music scene and helping me play a part in it. My gratitude extends to all those who agreed to be interviewed for this work. Not only for sharing their experiences and reflections but their friendship then and now. Brendon Anthony and Brian Rung deserve special mention for repeatedly making time to mull over my half-baked ideas over the last three years. Bill Whitbeck, whose story undergirds a significant portion of this work, also deserves special recognition. Finally, among my informants, Jack Ingram has held a special place in my life not only for sharing his music, but also for, quite literally, always being the first person to support each of my various endeavors in music. Along with being the first to volunteer to be interviewed for my project, Ingram traveled from Dallas to Austin to be at the debut of both of my radio shows. Thanks, Jack. Ingram's career will be the focus of the next chapter of this work, which I intend to publish as a book.

More than a decade after leaving radio to pursue a career as a secondary educator I decided to pursue my Masters in History. One option was Texas State which I noticed housed the Center for Texas Music History. After perusing the center's publications, I introduced myself through e-mail and asked pointedly why there was no academic work done on the scene I had played some small part in creating and promoting. Assistant Director Dr. Jason Mellard not only acknowledged the oversight, he invited me to do work on Texas Country as part of my program. This invitation cemented Texas State as my choice and, almost exactly three years later, has yielded this thesis.

Dr. Hartman, Dr. Mellard, and the scholarship they have facilitated and published through the Center for Texas Music History have been indispensable to this work and for that, they have my gratitude. I am also indebted to Dr. Mellard for consistently encouraging me and, when appropriate, restraining me throughout this process. Our lunch discussion of music and theory are a major inducement to continue towards the larger project.

Many of my own interviews inform this work. These sources will become increasingly important as my scholarship progresses through the careers of my contemporaries Ingram, Green, and Morrow. While I was not able to conduct true oral histories of my subjects, the skills I learned in Dan Utley's Oral History class have

proven invaluable to my research and allowed me to conduct dramatically more fruitful discussions with my subjects than otherwise possible. Thank you, Mr. Utley.

I should also spare a word for the subject of this work. While I did not have the opportunity to interview Robert Earl Keen for this work, in each of the many times I spent time around him during my radio days, I admired Robert Earl's kindness, intelligence, wit, and lack of pretense.

Finally, any time dedicated to this project was time taken from my wife, Leah, and children Jason, Olivia, and Harper. I am grateful for their patience. I also owe my parents, Rodney and Shirley Kelly, more than I can repay for their support for my academic pursuits. Without that, none of this would have been possible.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
CHAPTER	
I: Introduction.....	1
Any Saturday Night in Texas.....	1
A Note on Terminology.....	2
Scope.....	3
“Potentially Dangerous”: The Importance of Music Scenes.....	5
“Authentic’ now has more applications than Microsoft Windows”: Notions of Authenticity.....	7
“Performing the Texan”.....	10
“‘The Pope of Texas’”: Robert Earl Keen and the Texas Country MusicScene.....	15
II: The 1950s Through the 1970s.....	17
“Doing All He Can Not to Give In to the City”: 1956-1970.....	17
“‘The Willie Way’”: 1970-1974.....	21
“‘We Was Aggies’”: 1974-1980.....	25
III: The 1980s.....	29
Mañana: 1980-1984.....	29
“‘Intelligent Lyrics’”: No Kinda Dancer (1984).....	33

“The Last Filling Station”: Visions of the Past and Present on <i>No Kinda Dancer</i>	34
Nashville: 1984-1987.....	43
The Class of 1986.....	46
“A Hole in Your Soul Where the Wind Blows Through”: 1987-1989.....	52
“Thick and Gooney”: <i>The Live Album</i> (1988).....	54
“Undeniably Human”: <i>West Textures</i> (1989).....	56
IV: The 1990-1997.....	61
Folk Heroes: 1990-1993.....	61
“I Felt a Part of It”: The Beginnings of the Texas Country Scene.....	64
Robert Earl Keen and Organic Music.....	69
“A Huge Body County”: <i>A Bigger Piece of Sky</i> (1993).....	71
Dual Identity: 1993-1995.....	73
“Empty, Open Spaces”: <i>Gringo Honeymoon</i> (1994).....	77
The Rowdy Crowd: 1994-1997.....	81
“It Was Our ¡Viva Terlingua!”: <i>No. 2 Live Dinner</i> (1996).....	86
V: 1998 to the Present.....	92
“I Play Americana”: 1997-1998.....	92
“The Devil’s Spawn”: 1998-2001.....	97
“The Road Goes On...”: 2002-Present.....	100
Conclusion: “Along the Way a Culture is Created”.....	103

BIBLIOGRAPHY.....106

I: Introduction

Any Saturday Night in Texas

There is always music. Every weekend, and most weeknights, Texans descend on bars and concert venues to hear live music all over the state. This does not mean there is always a scene. In the last half century, Texas has seen important, identity-forming music scenes come and go. Some of these scenes have been local manifestations of national musical trends such as the folk movement of the late 1950s, the punk wave of the late 1970s, or the indie rock scene of the 1980s. Scenes such as those of the progressive country and Texas blues of the 1970s were centered in the state and exported to the rest of the nation. Each of these scenes shaped, and were shaped by, the communities and participants who identified with the music and social world it spawned.

In the 1990s in college cities and towns throughout Texas a new regional scene developed. The artists and fans of this musical movement actively and consciously strove to revive the values and musical heritage of the earlier progressive country scene and its outlaw offshoot. This scene, dubbed Texas Country, grew to include a robust network of live venues, numerous music festivals, a top ten chart, and a radio format. Major Texas newspapers such as the *Houston Chronicle* and *Dallas Observer* annually publish “best of” lists under that genre heading. Artists that emerged from this scene would break out nationally with Pat Green, Jack Ingram, Randy Rogers, and many others finding substantial mainstream chart success.¹

¹ Bill C. Malone and Jocelyn R. Neal, *Country Music U.S.A.* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 490.

The most significant figure in the formation of the Texas Country scene is singer-songwriter Robert Earl Keen. His failure to find success in more traditional avenues, particularly Nashville stardom, and his decision to carry on building a following in Texas would inadvertently, and at times regrettably for Keen, capture the imagination of a new generation of Texas music fans. As a result of Keen's inspiration, these fans launched their own musical careers and create one of the largest and most commercially successful regional music scenes in Texas history. Keen's example shaped their performance styles, instrumentation, and songwriting choices. Keen's relationship with the scene he fathered progressed from bemused surprise to frustration as he attempted to steer his career away from Texas Country and into the newly formed Americana format. Ultimately, Keen came to terms with his "spawn," begrudgingly accepting his place as the father of Texas Country.

A Note on Terminology

This scene has come to bear the problematic name "Texas Country." In its literal sense, Texas Country implies a quantity and variety of artists so vast as to defy any attempts to address them as a cohesive group. Academics do not have the power to name genres. Institutions such as record labels, trade groups and radio stations create genre names for the purpose of packaging and selling a group of artists to potential listeners. For example, in her book *The Selling Sound*, Diane Pecknold traces the process of a group of recordings labeled "hillbilly" before broadcasters and the recording industry discarded that name in favor of the more marketable "country" in the 1950s.² In the

² Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 93-95.

1970s Austin country scene it was radio program director Rusty Bell who branded the music “progressive country.”³ Similarly, Lone Star 93.3 in Austin, seeking to distinguish the music of local artists from that of the station’s mostly Nashville playlist, labeled artists such as Pat Green and Cory Morrow Texas Country.⁴ Over the last two decades, this term has become widely accepted and appears frequently in print, on radio, and on the internet. Texas Country as a label may be unsatisfying in a semantic sense, but as with other contested genre titles such as country itself, it is the term applied to this genre of music.

Today, fans and the recording industry sometimes refer to Texas Country as Red Dirt Music. Research suggests the two were regularly considered separate genres until being conflated around 2009. Red Dirt Music originally referred to the Oklahoma version of a similar genre spearheaded by Cross Canadian Ragweed. This study is concerned with Robert Earl Keen’s influence on the formation of the Texas Country scene, which predates the spread of the Oklahoma-based artists into Texas. Before 2001, few in the Texas Country scene were even aware of the Red Dirt scene and the term was largely unheard of among fans. For this reason, I will use Texas Country with full awareness of its misleading nature but acceptance that it is the title in common use.

³ Travis Stimeling, *Cosmic Cowboys and New Hicks: Countercultural Sounds of Austin's Progressive Country Music Scene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 30.

⁴ This decision was made by program director Chris Knight in February of 2000 at a meeting between Knight, myself, Morrow, and Green to name a show, Inside Texas Country, I created, developed, and produced.

Scope

This thesis focuses on Keen's impact on the formation of the Texas Country scene, a period I am defining as 1992 through 2001. My interview subjects have generally agreed upon this periodization as the formational period of the scene. The year 1992 saw the release of Jack Ingram's first album, which contains a Robert Earl Keen cover. This is appropriate as Ingram was the first artist in the younger generation (those born in the 1970s) to gain popularity among the college-aged crowds of the Texas Country scene. This time frame also encompasses the rise of the two other major artists in the early era, Cory Morrow and Pat Green. By 2001, dozens of artists playing an established circuit of venues across the state had clearly established the Texas Country scene. Listeners could hear Texas Country on the radio in every major market in the state and websites, and publications had surfaced dedicated to the scene. By 2001, multiple music festivals hosted five digit crowds in all-day events, including Keen's own Texas Music Uprisings.

The scene underwent two significant changes in 2001 that marked the end of the formational period. Green released his first major label album, joining Keen and Ingram, who had done so in 1997. Green's nationwide chart success elevated the Texas Country scene from a regional, largely independent, phenomenon into an industry that attracted nationwide interest. The second significant change during that time was the influx of performers from outside Texas, particularly the Red Dirt artists from Oklahoma, led by Cross Canadian Ragweed. This is not to imply anything about the relative quality of the music during or outside of this period and geographic location; it is merely an acknowledgement that as the scene gained adherents and expanded geographically it

becomes harder to perform a coherent academic analysis. For simplicity's sake and, to limit this study in time and space, This study focuses on Keen's own influences, his musical career through his major label debut in 1997, and his impact on the most important of his early Texas Country disciples: Ingram, Morrow, and Green.

An unfortunate aspect of covering this scene, as well as the earlier progressive country and outlaw scenes, is the dearth of female performers and participant voices. This thesis is largely a biography, and the subject is an Anglo male, but there are numerous women who played important roles in his story. Artists such as Nanci Griffith and Lucinda Williams inspired and collaborated with Keen from his earliest professional experiences. Emmylou Harris was both a key figure in the Nashville scene of the mid-1980s and recorded an important Keen cover. Keen's wife Kathleen has been his partner and sometimes manager since the pair met in 1984, and Keen credits promoter Denise Stiff with a key moment in his popular growth. Perhaps more encouraging is the recent success of female performers to emerge from and be embraced by the Texas Country scene. As Ingram, Morrow, Green, Rogers, and many more are Keen's musical sons, Miranda Lambert, Kacey Musgraves, Sunny Sweeney, Robyn Ludwick, the Trishas, Tina Wilkins, Bonnie Bishop, Bri Bagwell, and more are Keen's musical daughters.

“Potentially Dangerous”: The Importance of Music Scenes

In the academic study of cultures, music is a crucial element, but usually treated as an individual experience of consumption.⁵ It has only been since the 1970s and the pioneering work of the Birmingham School cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall and

⁵ David Riesman, "Listening to Popular Music," *American Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (1950): 359.

Dick Hebdige that the study of music has begun to examine the cultures and subcultures that form around a particular musical style.⁶

Music historian Travis Stimeling contends, “People’s musical tastes and interests reveal far more complexity and far more self-directed searching, testing, and experimenting” than can be simply categorized or marketed.⁷ Ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin argues people pursue musical interests with far more passion than almost any other leisure activity.⁸ According to sociomusicologist Simon Frith, music plays an outsized role in identity formation because it operates on both the individual and collective levels. As both an acceptance of an aesthetic proposition and an outward signifier of one’s cultural position, Frith maintains, musical tastes draw one “into emotional alliances with the performers and with the performer’s other fans.” Consequently, the most useful way to understand the role musical tastes play in crafting individuals’ identities is through an exploration of *collective* musical experience as opposed to *individual* musical experience.⁹

When these collective musical experiences occur in a particular space during a particular time, the result is a music scene. Barry Shank, the current head the Ohio State University Comparative Studies Department and a onetime musician in two 1980s Austin

⁶ John Bealle, "DIY Music and Scene Theory," Academia.edu (April 13, 2013), accessed May 3, 2016, https://www.academia.edu/4406896/DIY_Music_and_Scene_Theory.

⁷ Stimeling, *Cosmic Cowboys*, 2.

⁸ Mark Slobin, *Subculture Sounds: Micromusic of the West* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 41.

⁹ Simon Frith, "Music and Identity," in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996), 110, 121.

music scenes, defines a music scene as a “potentially dangerous overproduction and exchange of musicalized signs of identity and community.” Shank argues music scenes do more than simply express the values of a specific culture, or subculture, through a particular style but move “toward interrogation of dominant structures of identification, and potential cultural transformation.” Music scenes can function as intense and lasting arenas of identity construction.¹⁰ As Frith explains, scenes “offer the immediate experience of collective identity.” Frith insist music scenes do not merely reflect identities of participants, but construct new identities. The participants form important elements of their personal identity through their participation in the resulting scene.¹¹ Travis Stimeling, writing specifically about the progressive country scene in 1970s Austin, argues scenes are important because “we often build valuable social relationships with those who share our musical tastes, who are engaged in the same process of identity formation, and who might be interrogating the same issues we are.”¹² Thinking about scenes in this way is important because it shifts the focus away from the art produced onto the people who participate in the creation and consumption of those products. This work is ultimately about not only Keen’s musical output but also the reaction of a particular group of fans to his work. These participants became the performers, audience, and ancillary personnel in a scene. This social construct is the focus of my research and academic work.

¹⁰ Barry Shank, *Dissonant Identities: The Rock'n'Roll Scene in Austin, Texas* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994), 122.

¹¹ Frith, “Music and Identity,” 121, 109.

¹² Stimeling, *Cosmic Cowboys*, 43.

“‘Authentic’ now has more applications than Microsoft Windows”¹³: Notions of Authenticity

Genres, and the scenes that form around them, judge the quality of music on the basis of its perceived “real”-ness, often defined with the term “authenticity.”

Musicologists Michael Coyle and Jon Dolan contend, “Authenticity is usually a story about origins, a genealogical narrative.”¹⁴ It then naturally follows, as Walter Benjamin observes, “The presence of the original is a prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.”¹⁵ Johnathan Silverman refers to those who ascribe to this belief as authenticants, or fans who construct authenticity as being part of or present at the origin of a phenomenon. For authenticants, artists who are perceived as being first to perform a genre or subgenre are *authentikos* and are revered as having a high degree of authenticity. Authenticants often present “authenticity” as an objective standard by which music quality can be measured. They discuss who pioneered a particular aspect of musical performance or trace lines of influence from *authentikoi* to proclaim one artist’s superiority over the other.¹⁶

In reality, the standards of authenticity are subjective and vary wildly from genre to genre and fan to fan. As Coyle and Dolan explain, “Authenticity is a sign and not a quality and, like any sign, it functions differentially.”¹⁷ Consider how various genres

¹³ Michael Coyle and Jon Dolan, “Modelling Authenticity,” in *Reading Rock and Roll: Authenticity, Appropriation, Aesthetics*, ed. Kevin J. H. Dettmar and William Richey (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 29.

¹⁴ Coyle and Dolan, “Modelling Authenticity,” 26.

¹⁵ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Mechanical Age,” in *Illuminations* translated Hannah Arendt, London: Fontana, 214.

¹⁶ Jonathan Silverman, *Nine Choices: Johnny Cash and American Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), p. 11-12

¹⁷ Coyle and Dolan, “Modelling Authenticity,” 29.

construct authenticity. Fans of torch singers and pop artists find authenticity in the perceived emotional expression in an artist's voice. Fans associate this emotive quality with hitting and holding particular notes or employing vocal techniques such as melisma. For authenticants in this genre, it is irrelevant that Celine Dion, Barry Manilow, or Frank Sinatra did not write the music. Through their vocal performance, their fans come to believe the performers authentically feel the emotions presented in the lyric.

Heavy metal performers construct authenticity through musical virtuosity typically conceived as playing many notes rapidly or creating "heavy" musical sounds. Disdain for conventional norms expressed in dress and hair further impress authenticants of the genre. Punk employed a situationist ethos where the performing of music became almost irrelevant to the authenticity of the band.¹⁸ The ability to outrage observers and authorities who were not in on the joke replaced musical ability. The Austin punk band, the Huns, received national fame among punk rockers not because of their musicianship or songwriting but because they managed to provoke an Austin police officer into attacking them violently during a performance. For punk fans, this was more authentic than a pile of gold records or a shelf full of Grammys.¹⁹ Hip-hop emphasizes at least an illusion of verisimilitude between the artist's real life experience and the often crime-filled tales of their lyrics. Being arrested and continuing to dress like and associate with one's pre-stardom friends are key elements in establishing hip-hop authenticity.

¹⁸ Amy Britton, "Situationism Explained! and Its Affect on Punk and Pop Culture," *Louder Than War*, July 20, 2012 accessed June 1, 2017, <http://louderthanwar.com/situationism-explained-affect-punk-pop-culture/>.

¹⁹ Mike Hooker, "When We Were Young and There Were Rats on the Wall: Punk in Austin, the Raul's Years," *The Journal of Texas Music History* 13, no. 1 (2013): 40-55.

In much Anglo-Texas music the most common construction of authenticity centers on lyrics and a spare, stripped down performance style. Craig Clifford and ubiquitous progressive country guitarist Craig Hillis promote this standard in their recent collection of essays, *Pickers & Poets*. Their central conceit is that great music is “ruthlessly poetic.” “The poetic quality and substance of the lyrics are front and center” and “the mysterious telling phrase that lets us see something from a perspective that we wouldn’t normally have access to” are exalted.²⁰ The argument discounts composition, melody, musical virtuosity and the performative aspects of Texas music. This is problematic because it distorts the historical nature of a music scene. In real time, participants build scene through the communal aspects of gathering in venues and absorbing and contributing to the complete experience of the artists’ performance. As a historical phenomenon, particularly with the poor sound systems of the 1970s, the lyric might be the least important element of a performance. Over time as fans grow older and music transitions from the communal experience of a live show to the solitary experience of listening to a recording, dozens, or even hundreds, of times, the lyric grows in significance until other aspects become effectively irrelevant. For this reason, reprinting a particularly poetic artist’s lyrics is as sure to satisfy nostalgic fans of a genre as it is to fail to capture the historical experience of participation in that scene.

For Texas Country authenticants, the *authentikoi* they embraced as the forerunners of their own musical movement shaped notions of songwriting and live performance. The stars of the progressive country scene such as Willie Nelson, Jerry Jeff

²⁰ Craig Clifton and Craig Hillis, Editors, *Pickers & Poets: The Ruthlessly Poetic Singer-Songwriters from Texas*. (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2016), 1

Walker, and Waylon Jennings were key figures. They were joined by revered progressive country songwriters such as Guy Clark and Townes Van Zandt. The Texas stars of Nashville's "Class of 1986," particularly Lyle Lovett and Steve Earle, added a more updated, musically diverse element. While these artists would serve as the pantheon for Texas Country, none exerted more influence on the formation of the scene than Robert Earl Keen. Too young to catch the progressive country wave of the early 1970s and left behind in the Class of 1986, Keen steadily built a regional following and inadvertently, and somewhat ambivalently, become Texas Country's first superstar.

"Performing the Texan"

Throughout much of the first half of the twentieth century, Americans reveled in the spoils of the Industrial Revolution. Mass produced machine goods reinvented not only America's economy but its culture as well. Wildly uneven quality of supposedly identical goods and a limited supply of almost everything marred the preindustrial world was marred. Harnessing power to machines severely assuaged these problems. Corporations arose with words such as Standard, General, and Universal in their names promising a nationwide or even global supply of precision-made goods, each one indistinguishable from another of its type. Mass-produced, standardized, interchangeable parts assured customers of the quality of their purchases at more affordable prices.

This previously undreamt-of material success created a sense of endless progress and a call to reevaluate old ideas in areas such as science, literature, art, architecture, and music. "Make it new!" demanded poet Ezra Pound. Mass production along with mass

communication and improvements in transportation held the promise that goods could be perfected with exemplars of any consumable dominating the market and being produced and distributed on a scale that allowed consumers everywhere to purchase the best possible goods. This same theory applied to art, including music. The best singers could record songs written by the best songwriters and backed by the best bands. These records were distributed for sale or transmitted through media, nationally or even universally. Peripheral regions would not have to suffer substandard quality anymore.

For decades, this model was widely embraced by the American public. Eventually, however, critics arose. Some began to pine for the days of handmade objects, arguing their imperfections gave them desirable character and uniqueness. Others observed that goods, and particularly art, designed to appeal to the broadest cross section of consumers did not fit their own personal tastes. Many responded to their distaste of modernist mass consumption by accepting the belief that identity can be formed through consumption, yet choosing to distinguish themselves through their choices of goods consumed. William Roseberry, in his deconstruction of specialty coffee production and consumption, introduces many postmodern concepts that applied to music taste as well, particularly that “one can cultivate and display ‘taste’ and ‘discrimination’” through consumption choices. Roseberry argues that Americans in the late twentieth century rejected mass marketing and needed to believe products were personally crafted to their tastes and perceived identities. Furthermore, Roseberry points out the marketing of specialty coffees is often linked to a pre-mass production past as evidenced by such effects as selling the beans whole in burlap bags. This desire for a personal connection

with consumption, often paired with an imagined past, comprised a large part of the appeal of both gourmet coffees and Texas Music.²¹

By the 1990s, the late twentieth-century tendency for Americans to construct their identity through their listening preferences made music a particularly powerful commodity in the postmodern rejection of mass consumption. Even earlier in the century, critics and theorists of so-called “high art” embraced “a rhetoric whereby to imagine a preindustrial, pre-commercial past.” Over time, the very consumers who were the critiques’ targets embraced the elitist’s construction of authenticity. This rejection of the overtly commercial, in some quarters, created a challenge for producers and marketers of music because, “Most fans do not wish to see themselves as consumers, even though they pay for recordings or concert tickets.” This establishes a paradox where labels employ authenticity as a marketing strategy, yet selling records threatens an artist’s perceived authenticity.²²

Both the scene that Keen emerged from and the one he largely inspired were rooted in notions of embracing an imagined historical Anglo-Texan identity in a time when urbanization and homogenization were radically transforming the state from a cotton, cattle, and oil culture into an urban and suburban high tech center. During the 1960s, Archer City, Texas, native Larry McMurtry began a career that would make him the Lone Star State’s most revered author by wrestling with this issue. Between 1961 and 1966, he published, “three short elegiac novels, all of which dealt in a small way with a

²¹ William Roseberry, “The Rise of Yuppie Coffee and the Reimagining of Class in the United States,” *American Anthropologist New Series* 98, vol.4 (December, 1996), 762-75.

²² Coyle and Dolan, “Modelling Authenticity,” 23.

large theme: the move from the land to the cities (or the small town to the suburbs).”

Horesman Pass By, *Leaving Cheyenne*, and *The Last Picture Show* each approached the subject by way of literary metaphor. In 1968, McMurtry addressed the subject directly in his book of essays, *In a Narrow Grave*. In the introduction, McMurtry explains that even as a teenager, he realized he was witnessing the death of a “rural, pastoral way of life.” McMurtry and his early protagonists all were fascinated by their own distorted ideas of Texas’s agrarian past since, “the myth of the cowboy grew purer every year because there were so few cowboys left to contradict it.”²³

McMurtry also had no illusions about the future. “The city will win, of course, but its victory won’t be cheap – the country traditions were very strong.” To be young in Texas in the latter half of the twentieth century was to negotiate these two forces. McMurtry prophesied, “The descendants of the trail-hands will be driving beer trucks in the suburbs of Ft. Worth, Dodge City, Cheyenne and a score of other cities whose name once held a different kind of promise.”²⁴

In his book *Progressive Country: How the 1970s Transformed the Texan in Popular Culture*, Jason Mellard argues young Anglo Texans responded to this transformation of their native culture by “performing the Texan.” “Texanness,” Mellard posits, is “in part, a performance, a set of strategies and gestures, some conscious, some not.” Young adults typically experiment with potential identities. They explore various social groups, modes of dress, speech and music. For young Texans, this commonly

²³ Larry McMurtry, *In a Narrow Grave: Essays on Texas* (New York City: Dial Press, 1968), xiii.

²⁴ McMurtry, *In a Narrow Grave*, 27-8.

includes identifying themselves with cultural markers associated with their home state such as boots, outdoor activities such as hunting, fishing and camping, and the state's native music. Periodically, McMurtry's beer truck drivers play out their mythological cowboy past en masse. The scenes that developed around Bob Wills and a host of singing cowboys in the 1930s and 1940s and the progressive and subsequent outlaw country scenes of the 1970s are two prominent examples of this phenomenon.²⁵ At the turn of the millennium, "performing the Texan" through the celebration of Texas Country music and its attendant culture once again took center stage for a new generation of young Texans.²⁶ Robert Earl Keen, the key figure in this revival, was first a fan himself, "performing the Texan" in his own right during the days of Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, and Jerry Jeff Walker. Inspired by these 1970s Texas icons, Keen toiled in relative obscurity for almost two decades before becoming the undisputed patriarch of the Texas Country scene.²⁷

"The Pope of Texas": Robert Earl Keen and the Texas Country Music Scene

After almost two decades of decline, the Texas Country scene revived many of the cultural themes of the earlier progressive country scene in the 1990s. The artists who comprised the Texas Country scene were influenced by the progressive and outlaw artists of the 1970s such as Jerry Jeff Walker and Willie Nelson, but no artist more directly inspired this new generation to begin writing and playing than Robert Earl Keen. His

²⁵ Jason Mellard, *Progressive Country: How the 1970s Transformed the Texan in Popular Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), 6.

²⁶ Skip Hollandsworth, "With Envy," *Texas Monthly*, (June, 2002): 84-87, 119-121.

²⁷ Reid, "Cult of Keen," *Texas Monthly* (April 1996): 84-88.

longtime guitarist Rich Brotherton recalled a honky-tonk proprietor whose first question to unknown acts at the turn of the century was, “Are you a hat, or a Robert Earl Keen?”²⁸ His influence was so profound it neatly divided new artists into Nashville style “hat acts” or disciples who covered Keen’s songs to forge a new “Texas canon.”²⁹ Legendary steel guitar player, occasional Keen sideman, and producer of the majority of seminal Texas Country albums, Lloyd Maines points to Keen as the father of Texas Country.³⁰ Maines proclaimed, “Whether he admits it or not, [Keen] started the deal.”³¹

Of the more than a dozen Texas Country artists interviewed for this project, all of them cite Keen as an important, if not the most important, influence on their careers. Jack Ingram, whom the *Dallas Observer* called the originator of the “post-Robert Earl Keen syndrome,” cites Keen’s music as having led him to write original songs.³² The fact that Keen, unlike Nelson, Walker, and Jennings, had not found a wider audience only added to Keen’s appeal. “He was closer to where I was,” Ingram recalled, “He made it a little more attainable.”³³ Texas Country artist Robert Henry was impressed with Keen’s

²⁸ Richard Skanse, "Robert Earl Keen: A Man Apart," LoneStarMusic.com (Sept/Oct 2011), accessed January 24, 2017, https://www.lonestarmusic.com/magazine/mag_html/septoct11/coverstore.html.

²⁹ Freeman, Danny, “Robert Earl Keen: Inside REK's Inner Sanctum, the Scriptorium,” *Austin Chronicle*, January 30, 2015.

³⁰ Lee Nichols, “This Guy is Everywhere,” *Austin Chronicle*, November 8, 1996.

³¹ Skanse, “A Man Apart.”

³² Rob Patterson, "Out Here," *Dallas Observer*, October 7, 1999.

³³ Jack Ingram, phone interview by author, Ruidoso, NM, March 13, 2016.

accessibility, remembering sitting on a tailgate after a show with Keen, who gave him a beer and a CD.³⁴

Future Texas Country superstars Pat Green and Randy Rogers both preferred Top 40 music until girlfriends exposed them to Keen.³⁵ Green met his fiddle player, Brendon Anthony, the current head of the Texas Music Office, at a Keen show.³⁶ Green's friend and fellow star Cory Morrow expressed being overwhelmed when asked to sing on Keen's *Live Dinner Reunion* album in 2016.³⁷ Green, Morrow, South Austin Jug Band founder James Hyland, and the Brauns, four brothers who paired off to form Reckless Kelly and Micky and the Motorcars, all began their careers with sets dominated by Keen covers.³⁸ Reckless Kelly frontman Willy Braun calls Keen "the pope" of Texas Country. Wade Bowen admits his original band, West 84, started as a Robert Earl Keen cover band. Cody Canada of Cross Canadian Ragweed paid Keen what might be the highest compliment of all, declaring the influential artist the Willie Nelson of the Texas Country and Red Dirt scenes.³⁹

³⁴ Robert Henry, phone interview by author, Los Angeles, CA, November 15, 2016.

³⁵ Pat Green, interview by author, Fort Worth, TX, February 4, 2017; Randy Rogers, interview by author, College Station, TX, October 28, 2016.

³⁶ Brendon Anthony, e-mail to author, June 1, 2015.

³⁷ Robert Earl Keen, "Cory's Story," *Live Dinner Reunion*, Dualtone Music, 2016, CD.

³⁸ David Henry, phone interview with author, Lubbock, TX, August 28, 2016.; James Hyland, phone interview with author, Austin, TX, April 11, 2016.; Micky Braun, phone interview with author, Austin, TX, January 31, 2017.

³⁹ Ray Benson, "Robert Earl Keen is our featured "Texas Legend" on the Texas Music Scene," YouTube video, 4:11, posted by "The Texas Music Scene TV," March 6, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8q9C7_VUP-U.

Given Keen's undeniable position as the primary inspiration and architect of the Texas Country scene, the best way to begin understanding the music and culture of that movement is with an exploration of Keen's own life and music. His musical experiences and output serve as a bridge between the progressive country scene of the 1970s and the Texas Country of the 1990s and 2000s. As Robert Henry explained, "It went Robert Earl..., then there was this gap, and for a second there it was only filled by Pat, Cory and Jack Ingram and then boom."⁴⁰ An examination of Keen's career and recordings provides the key to understanding the musical style and lyrical themes that shaped the artists he inspired and the notions of Texanness they helped inculcate in their fans.

⁴⁰ Robert Henry, interview.

II: The 1950s Through the 1970s

“Doing All He Can Not to Give In to the City”: 1956-1970

Sharpstown, a suburb in southwest Houston, was literally a prototype of the new suburban Texas McMurry wrote about. Built to accommodate Houston’s growing Anglo-middle class professional population, Sharpstown was one of the nation’s first master planned communities. In 1955, developer Frank Sharp set aside land for schools and retail outlets, as well as donating land for the construction of U.S. Highway 59, ensuring a commuter route into Houston. In its early days, Sharpstown was thought to be the biggest suburb in the nation and boasted the state’s first air-conditioned shopping mall.⁴¹

It was into this aspiring utopia that Robert Earl Keen, Jr. was born on January 11, 1956. Keen was the second of three children of his geologist father and attorney mother. Keen was drawn to music from an early age, composing an ode to Larry’s Mexican Food Restaurant when he was just eight. Through his parents Keen was exposed to country and folk music such as Jimmie Rodgers. The minimalist approach of Rodgers shaped Keen’s style. “I loved his sound, just his guitar and voice.”⁴² Like McMurry’s urbanizing Texans, the Keens strove to maintain their connection to the fading rural Texas culture. They often spent weekends at the family’s retreat near Columbus, a small Texas community midway between Houston and Austin on Interstate 10. There, the young Keen

⁴¹ Chris Lane, “The Changing Face of Houston: Sharpstown Then and Now,” *Houston Press*, September 15, 2014, accessed February 14, 2017, <http://www.houstonpress.com/arts/the-changing-face-of-houston-sharpstown-then-and-now-6375569>.

⁴² Nick Forster, “Episode #1643 Robert Earl Keen/John Fullbright,” eTown.org, 59:01 (October 26, 2016): Accessed January 15, 2017, <https://www.ETOWN.org/broadcasts/robert-earl-keen-john-fullbright/>.

enjoyed spending his evenings watching and listening to the Czech and German polka dances.⁴³

In middle school, Keen's taste turned more towards the popular rock music of the time, such as Cream and the Beatles.⁴⁴ By high school, Keen's brother Dan, nine years Robert Earl's senior, turned his younger brother on to country music. Hank Williams and Buck Owens, along with Rodgers, were favorites of the Keen brothers.⁴⁵ Keen found a kindred spirit in his "best friend since the third grade," Bryan Duckworth.⁴⁶ Keen and Duckworth would cruise Sharpstown listening to Rodgers, Bob Wills, Ernest Tubb, and other early country stars.⁴⁷ Soon the pair added bluegrass music to their playlist, further embracing largely acoustic traditional forms of music. For Keen, this process of exploring his influences' influences was his way of connecting to both his Texan identity and mythologizing a preindustrial past.⁴⁸

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Houston, as the headquarters for NASA and a key city in the oil industry, rapidly embraced modernity and the high tech economy that came with it. Houston professional sports teams of the time boasted names reflecting this: Oilers, Astros, Rockets, Aeros, and Stars. Sharpstown High School, where Keen

⁴³ Jan Reid, "The Cult of Keen."

⁴⁴ Shermakaye Basse, "TH Moment: Robert Earl Keen," *Texas Highways* (June 2009), accessed February 7, 2017, <https://www.texashighways.com/blog/item/133-a-th-moment-with-robert-earl-keen>.

⁴⁵ Skanse, "Robert Earl Keen: A Man Apart."

⁴⁶ Robert Earl Keen, Jr., "The Bluegrass Widow," *No Kinda Dancer*, Philo, 1988, LP.

⁴⁷ Michael Hall, "On the Porch with Robert and Lyle," *Texas Monthly*, (July 2015), accessed January 22, 2017, <http://www.texasmonthly.com/the-culture/on-the-porch-with-robert-and-lyle/>.

⁴⁸ Skanse, "A Man Apart."

graduated in 1974, took as their mascot the Apollos. While Houston reached for the heavens, Keen and other Anglo suburbanites fixed their gaze squarely on the agrarian past. Country and bluegrass music came to represent this vanishing culture.⁴⁹

Keen's interest in country music mirrored a national trend towards country rock. Ushered in by Bob Dylan's 1967 release *John Wesley Harding*, mainstream rock acts such as the Byrds, Poco, New Riders of the Purple Sage, and the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band embraced country elements in a style dubbed country rock.⁵⁰ Coyle and Dolan see this artistic choice as a protest of the commercial aspects of the music industry that was, ironically, highly profitable. "The turn of these new bands to countrified or folkified rock was meant to signify rejection of consumer culture and it proved a commercially substantial gesture."⁵¹ In his history *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of Working Class Culture*, historian Jefferson Cowie argues the former hippies' embrace of country music imagery and music was a manifestation of their failed attempts to raise the consciousness of blue collar Americans. In the chapter "I'm Dyin' Here," Cowie uses popular music of the late 1960s and early 1970s to argue that during this time well-meaning liberals turned to their rural roots in the form of country to reach out to the common working people they believed they could construct a utopia for and with. In a powerful deconstruction of Jackson Browne's "For Everyman" (1973), Cowie sees Browne accusing liberals, overwhelmed by the task, abandoning the common man and

⁴⁹ Matt Kemp, "Robert Earl Keen: Confessions of a Front Porch Picker," *Acoustic Guitar*, January 15, 2016, accessed January 13, 2017, <http://acousticguitar.com/robert-earl-keen-confessions-of-a-front-porch-picker/>.

⁵⁰ Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 386-7.

⁵¹ Coyle, "Modelling Authenticity," 30.

seeking their own “peaceful, easy feelings” in solitary rural (or suburban) existences. This California brand of country rock, led by the Eagles, quickly abandoned its rustic qualities in favor of a smoother sound before drifting back towards rock by the mid-1970s.⁵² Texas, with its rural past so near and mythology so alluring, was particularly susceptible to this sort of logic. As Jan Reid explains in his genre-defining study, *The Improbable Rise of Redneck Rock*, “the craze for nostalgia, to get away from it all, engulfed almost all popular forms of American expression, and in Austin, the musical retreat led naturally enough to country and western.”⁵³ Larry McMurtry wrote about his own youth, “Intellectually I had long been a city boy, but imaginatively I was still trudging up the dusty path that led out of the country.”⁵⁴ As the seventies dawned, Keen walked a similar path.

“The Willie Way”: 1970-1974

During high school, Keen's younger sister exposed him to Houston's singer songwriter scene. Still too young to drive, Kathy Keen established herself as a legendary foosball player in downtown Houston. Robert Earl served as her chauffeur.⁵⁵ While his kid sister dominated the tabletop pitch, Keen stumbled upon his future. Keen recalls in the downtown bars “there was always some guy or some girl or some duo playing really

⁵² Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The Last Days of the 1970s and the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 182-187.

⁵³ Jan Reid, *The Improbable Rise of Redneck Rock: New Edition* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004), 14.

⁵⁴ McMurtry, *In a Narrow Grave*, xiv.

⁵⁵ Peter Sagal, “Not My Job: Singer Robert Earl Keen Gets Quizzed On Cats,” National Public Radio, March 7, 2015, accessed February 15, 2017, www.npr.org: <http://www.npr.org/2015/03/07/391201196/not-my-job-singer-robert-earl-keen-gets-quizzed-on-cats>.

cool guitar and vocal music.”⁵⁶ Taxiing his sister, Keen heard Willis Alan Ramsey, Mance Lipscomb, Lightnin’ Hopkins, the Talking Heads, and numerous forgotten performers playing simple, acoustic performances in coffeehouses and lounges all around Houston. He discovered Anderson Fair and other venues that featured singer songwriters.⁵⁷

Keen was exploring the remnants of Houston’s influential 1960s folk scene. This scene emerged from the Houston Folklore Society’s monthly Hootenannies. Real estate developer John A. Lomax, Jr. led the organization. Lomax had traveled with his father, who pioneered the practice of canvassing the South and recording folk songs in the 1930s. The senior Lomax had discovered and recorded hundreds of folk singers, including the imprisoned Lead Belly, while establishing himself as one of the founding fathers of the study of folk music.⁵⁸ His son was an amateur folklorist who organized and performed in the Houston “hoots.” Exalted bluesmen Lightnin’ Hopkins and Mance Lipscomb were two of the stars of these Sunday performances. Future Texas songwriting legend Guy Clark was a regular. “John Lomax [Jr.] was always at Hermann Park, and we’d sit around in the summertime, just twenty or thirty people in circles singing songs,” Clark recalled. Soon a string of coffee shops and lounges began hosting the folkies, including the Jester Lounge, Sand Mountain, Anderson Fair, and the Old Quarter. Hopkins, Lipscomb, and

⁵⁶ Forster, “Episode #1643 Robert Earl Keen.”

⁵⁷ Skanse, “A Man Apart;” e-Town, “Robert Earl Keen.”

⁵⁸ Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music*, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 47-75.

local white musician Frank Davis were the scene's biggest stars. Future country superstars John Denver and K.T. Oslin spent some time making the circuit as well.⁵⁹

For Texas Country fans in the 1990s, the scene is most notable for three performers, unknown at the time. Guy Clark moved to Houston from Rockport, where he met Houstonian Townes Van Zandt playing the small clubs. The two began a friendship that would last until Townes's death on New Year's Day 1997. The scene was key to the artistic formation of both artists who incorporated elements of the blues and folk they witnessed into their long and celebrated songwriting careers. Clark and Van Zandt also made the acquaintance of a rambling New Yorker who had reinvented himself as Jerry Jeff Walker after going AWOL from the National Guard to pursue the romanticized life of a wandering folksinger. These three were among the most revered songwriters of the progressive country scene that Texas Country music would attempt to revive.⁶⁰

By the time Keen arrived, Clark had moved to Tennessee to write songs for a publishing house. Van Zandt and Walker had rambled on to resurface in Austin. All three still routinely played the small clubs in Houston where Keen first saw them.⁶¹ By 1974, Keen's senior year of high school, his older brother had converted Robert Earl into a rabid progressive country fan.⁶² Centered in Austin and associated with the famous

⁵⁹ Tamara Saviano, *Without Getting Killed or Caught: The Life and Music of Guy Clark*, (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2016), 69.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 72-77.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Jan Reid, "Lyle Lovett and Robert Earl Keen: Cosmic Aggies," in *Pickers & Poets: The Ruthlessly Poetic Singer-Songwriters from Texas*, ed. Craig Clifton and Craig Hillis (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2016), 167.

Armadillo World Headquarters, the progressive country scene Keen embraced as a fan was populated by “middle class youths who hailed from Texas’ cities, but as such they were rarely more than two or three generations removed from more rural times.”⁶³ Like Keen, these young suburbanites in their blue jeans, boots, and pearl snap shirts longed to fulfill McMurtry’s prophecy, seeking to perform the Texan by drinking Lone Star beer to Willie Nelson and Jerry Jeff Walker. Performers and participants promoted a “strange melange of western swing, honky-tonk, blues, Cajun, zydeco, and conjunto music, which became known in Texas as ‘progressive country music.’”⁶⁴

Keen engaged in the progressive country scene whenever possible, even foregoing his senior prom to catch Willie Nelson at Houston’s Half Dollar Club.⁶⁵ In the summer after graduating high school, Keen drove his Ford Mustang to Texas Motor Speedway near College Station for a three-day celebration of Texas music and Texan identity. Willie Nelson’s second Fourth of July picnic featured a massive lineup including Kris Kristofferson, Waylon Jennings, Jimmy Buffet, Townes Van Zandt, and the red-headed stranger himself. Even Ricky Nelson and his Stone Canyon Band made the show, representing the California brand of country rock.⁶⁶ Keen awoke from a debauchery-induced nap to discover that the drought-parched grass where he had parked had caught fire, and his Mustang had burned up. He lost a car that day but did get to meet a

⁶³ Jan Reid, *Improbable Rise*, 13.

⁶⁴ Stimeling, *Cosmic Cowboys*, 2.

⁶⁵ Skanse, “A Man Apart.”

⁶⁶ Danny Garrett, *Weird Yet Strange: Notes from an Austin Music Artist*, (Fort Worth: TCU Press, TX, 2015), 128.

sympathetic Willie for a brief moment before Nelson had to go jam with Oklahoma blues great Leon Russell. Over the following decades, Keen incorporated the tale into his live shows, ultimately releasing it on 1996's *No. 2 Live Dinner* and using a picture, presumably, of his Mustang fully engulfed in flames for the cover of 1997's *Picnic*.⁶⁷

In the summer of 1974, Keen picked up a gut string guitar discarded by his little sister.⁶⁸ Between high school and college, he went to work in the East Texas oil fields armed with his sister's guitar and a book of songs. Among the first songs Keen learned to play was Nelson's "Hello Walls."⁶⁹ Pleased to see their unfocused son dedicating himself to anything, Keen's "notoriously cheap" parents shocked the budding musician by buying him an expensive high-end Martin D-35 guitar.⁷⁰ Touched by his parents' support and driven to play music, Keen practiced his precious gift non-stop. Keen had routinely won prizes in school poetry contests and used these skills in songwriting. The first "real" song Keen recalls writing was a Jimmy Buffet style tune about working in the oil fields that has not survived. It was during this time Keen decided what he wanted to do with his life. He pondered a future as one of the "ants" working in the oil business. "I didn't have any interest in following in [my father's] footsteps, though. I was more interested in music, art, writing, and happy hour."⁷¹

⁶⁷ Robert Earl Keen, "The Road Intro," *No. 2 Live Dinner*, Sugar Hill, 1996, CD.

⁶⁸ Freeman, "Inside REK's Inner Sanctum."

⁶⁹ Kemp, "Confessions of a Front Porch Picker."

⁷⁰ Skanse, "A Man Apart."

⁷¹ Christian Gray, "One More Image: Robert Earl Keen Searches for...," *Austin Chronicle*, April 25, 1997.

“We Was Aggies”: 1974-1980

As a recording artist, Keen is inextricably linked to his alma mater, Texas A&M University. He recalls being ambivalent about where to attend college. Despite coming from a family of University of Texas Longhorns, he simply followed his best friend out of Sharpstown to College Station.⁷² Keen switched his major to English after realizing how much math and science was involved in an animal science degree. In his early years in College Station, the primary thing Keen learned was there was no supervision in college. “I could spend all my time watching TV,” Keen recalls.⁷³ “I got kicked out of school a couple of times. They never really offered any assistance; they just booted you. The second time I got kicked out, I found a pamphlet offering study help, but it said they were meeting at the Dixie Chicken. That really wasn’t what I needed!”⁷⁴

While Keen neglected his studies, he focused on his music. New friends expanded his musical horizons. “We ran into some kids who were from very rural areas,” Keen explained. “We were from Houston, you know, so we were city slickers, but these kids were from places like Pampa and Levelland [Texas]. They loved country and bluegrass and western swing, and they’d be playing fiddle and mandolin, and it was great.”⁷⁵ Keen and Duckworth rented a run-down house on Church Street across from the Texas A&M campus in the North Gate section of town which became the nexus of a collection of

⁷² “At Home in Texas -Robert Earl and Kathleen Keen,” April 1, 2010, accessed February 24, 2017, <http://www.comanchetrace.com/blog/at-home-in-texas-2>.

⁷³ Gray, “One More Image.”

⁷⁴ Comanche Trace, “At Home in Texas.”

⁷⁵ Kemp, “Confessions of a Front Porch Picker.”

young Aggies united by their interest in country, western swing, and bluegrass music.⁷⁶

The house and its front porch became a key focus of identity formation for Keen and his friends as they reenacted the age-old ritual of performing the Texan. This spiritual birthplace of Texas Country has long since been torn down and is now a parking lot.⁷⁷

The rotating group of musicians who congregated at the Church Street house soon coalesced into an attempted bluegrass band dubbed the Front Porch Boys. The group was limited to playing flea markets, church suppers, and other small shows that did not require a public address system.⁷⁸ Keen also turned their unquenchable musical thirst towards more local fare during this time. The band lacked the instrumental virtuosity required to play bluegrass standards, so Keen turned his attention towards writing original music inspired by more contemporary artists such as Willie Nelson, Guy Clark, Jerry Jeff Walker, and Jimmy Buffet.⁷⁹

In mainstream music, enormously popular bands playing bloated stadium tours to crowds that at times topped 100,000 fans characterized the summer of 1976. Disco music was ascendant with Abba's "Dancing Queen" taking the prize as the year's top single. In the second slot was Queen's epic, operatic "Bohemian Rhapsody" followed by the easy

⁷⁶ Skanse, "A Man Apart."

⁷⁷ Andy Langer, "A Bit of Banter Between Robert Earl Keen and Lyle Lovett," *Texas Monthly*, (May 28, 2013), Accessed January 22, 2017. <http://www.texasmonthly.com/the-culture/a-bit-of-banter-between-robert-earl-keen-and-lyle-lovett/>.

⁷⁸ Kemp, "Confessions of a Front Porch Picker."

⁷⁹ Freeman, "Inside REK's Inner Sanctum."

listening smash “If You Leave Me Now” by Chicago.⁸⁰ Dylan’s Rolling Thunder Revue brought America’s greatest songwriter to massive venues with a cast of dozens, a far cry from his hushed-man-and-guitar early outings.⁸¹ The Recording Industry Association of America certified *The Eagles Greatest Hits* as the first platinum record.⁸² A few bands, having mastered a magic musical and marketing formula, notched staggering album and ticket sales. Music had been standardized. Modernism was triumphant.

Yet some fans questioned the dominant musical consensus. In New York City’s unfashionable Bowery, the Ramones released their eponymous debut album. They thought it was a retro homage to simpler surf rock and roll, but others saw it as a postmodern deconstruction of the entire rock genre. The Ramones shared the C.B.G.B. stage with musical revolutionaries Television, the Talking Heads, Patti Smith, and others while alternative music godfather Lou Reed, one of punk’s great *authentikoi*, overwhelmed the scene with “street cred” and cool flaunting his transgendered girlfriends.⁸³ A few miles to the north in an even more unfashionable quarter, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five became the first hip hop band to play a major venue taking the Avalon Ballroom’s stage in Harlem that September.⁸⁴ An ocean away, a

⁸⁰ “Songs from the Year 1976,” accessed March 1, 2017, <http://tsort.info/music/yr1976.htm>.

⁸¹ “Still on the Road,” accessed March 1, 2017, <http://www.bjorner.com/DSN02910%201975%20Rolling%20Thunder%20Revue.htm>.

⁸² Paul Grein, “Chart Watch Extra: Where “Thriller” Ranks,” Chart Watch, November 20, 2012, accessed March 1, 2017, <https://www.yahoo.com/music/blogs/chart-watch/chart-watch-extra-where-thriller-ranks-193809485.html>.

⁸³ Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain, *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk* (New York: Grove Press, 1996).

⁸⁴ Jeff Purcell, “All Hands on Deck,” *The Guardian*, February 26, 2009.

few dozen Manchester youths stared slack-jawed as a ridiculously hostile, pale twenty year old calling himself Johnny Rotten glowered at them. On that single night in July, the Sex Pistols would send the founders of Joy Division, New Order, the Buzzcocks, Simply Red, the Smiths, the Fall and the revolutionary Factory Records scrambling to launch their music careers.⁸⁵ In this light, Keen's rejection of mainstream country is part of a larger rejection of standardized music and a postmodern search for a more personal musical experience.

Down in College Station, 1976 was a pivotal year for Keen as well. One day a journalism and German major passing the porch stopped to listen in. Keen invited the young man up onto the porch and offered a guitar. The student, Lyle Lovett, made a deep impression on Keen. Typically, Keen spent his summer working in the oil fields, but in 1978, he stayed in College Station to raise his grade point average. Keen and Lovett ended up taking an American literature class together and grew inseparable. Along with their musical tastes, the two shared a suburban Houston upbringing, with Lovett hailing from Klein. Lovett impressed Keen with his musical professionalism. Lovett booked Austin-based singer-songwriters such as Willis Alan Ramsey and Nanci Griffith as part of the Basement Committee, a wandering coffeehouse concert series. Lovett was also already writing and performing his own songs in public. He was dedicated to being a professional musician and developed a solo show which inspired Keen to make music more than just a hobby."⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Peter Hook, *Unknown Pleasures: Inside New Order* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 30-5.

⁸⁶ Reid, "Cult of Keen."

III: The 1980s

Mañana: 1980-1984

Keen graduated from Texas A&M with a degree in English in 1978, a year before Lovett. Determined to advance his musical career, Keen journeyed to Austin in 1980 to buy a public address system for the Front Porch Boys. Upon returning to College Station, he learned the band had broken up in his absence.⁸⁷ Familiar with the capital city from frequent college trips to catch music shows, Keen moved to Austin with his newly acquired P.A. and immediately began performing anywhere that would have him for tips or discounted meals.⁸⁸

Lacking a full set of originals, Keen covered his influences such as Jerry Jeff Walker, Willie Nelson, Merle Haggard, Bob Dylan, Richard Thompson, and Loudon Wainwright.⁸⁹ Keen found facing an audience alone with just his guitar, “incredibly liberating.” Normally shy, Keen was a different person on stage, filling time between songs with the jokes and stories that would remain a staple of his live performances.⁹⁰ These elements became a major source of Keen’s appeal to both his folk and Texas Country audiences. Michael Kilian, an early participant in the Texas Country crowd, recalled hearing Keen for the first time on a cassette in a friend’s truck. “I thought he was terrible. There really wasn’t much about him I liked, until I saw him live. Then it was just

⁸⁷ Comanche Trace, “At Home in Texas.”

⁸⁸ Gray, “One More Image.”

⁸⁹ Jim King, “Robert Earl Keen and Jim King of the Road,” YouTube Video, 5:25, September 27, 2012, accessed February 1, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ln7XlQtcJzU>.

⁹⁰ Skanse, “A Man Apart.”

fucking awesome.”⁹¹ Another early college-aged fan, Brian Zintgraff, enjoyed Keen’s live shows because the singer was “relatable. The way he told a story was funny. The way he engaged the audience was not how anybody else did it. His thirty-second interlude or story is hilarious. When Jerry Jeff Walker stops singing he’s going to yell at you if you make a song request.” Zintgraff felt that “Robert Earl was having more fun than most of the people there.”⁹²

Keen landed a job as an oil proration analyst for the Texas Railroad Commission. In just a year and a half he saved enough money to send his parents on a European vacation before quitting his nine-to-five job to pursue music as a career. Keen’s low-level gigs rarely paid more than \$25, which meant paying the bills was always a struggle. He routinely worked odd jobs to make ends meet, spending time in construction, as a courier, overnights at the IRS, and other “flunky stuff.”⁹³

The progressive country scene in Austin had cooled by the 1980s. Even the Armadillo World Headquarters shuttered its doors on New Year’s Day 1981. The 1980 film *Urban Cowboy* boasts a soundtrack that dominated country radio play, ushering in both a city slicker cowboy fashion craze and pop-infused country radio hits.⁹⁴ While Willie and Waylon still routinely charted hits, the stripped-down bluegrass and western swing style Keen favored was largely out of fashion. The hot acts in town were the blues

⁹¹ Michael Kilian, interview with author, Austin, February 21, 2017

⁹² Brian Zintgraff, interview with author, San Antonio, February 20, 2017.

⁹³ Comanche Trace, “At Home in Texas.”

⁹⁴ Mellard, *Progressive Country*, 183-90.

rockers such as the Fabulous Thunderbirds, Lou Ann Barton, Paul Ray and the Cobras, and ascendant guitar hero Stevie Ray Vaughan. Other live music fans, intoxicated by a San Antonio Sex Pistols gig, began building a small but notable punk scene at Raul's, a Mexican-American bar across Guadalupe Street from the University of Texas.⁹⁵ Considering Keen's singer songwriter aspirations and his remarkable gift for storytelling, these developments were a blessing, allowing him to hone his songwriting and performance craft in front of small, quiet audiences instead of having to compete with the large and raucous country scene of the 1970s.⁹⁶

Amidst the ashes of the cosmic cowboy movement, a new generation of folksingers emerged playing mainly around Houston and Austin. Keen and his college friend Lovett fell in with these likeminded songwriters, befriendng such talents as Steve Earle, Nanci Griffith, Lucinda Williams, Mandy Mercier, and Eric Taylor.⁹⁷ Keen and his kindred spirits came to idolize expatriate Texans Townes Van Zandt and Guy Clark. The pair of best friends lived primarily in Nashville, where their widely admired compositions appeared on major stars' records, but the aspiring songwriters back in Texas were far more interested in Van Zandt and Clark's poor-selling but critically lauded albums.⁹⁸

Ultimately, each of these artists would decide to leave Austin to escape what Earle described as the city's "mañana attitude." Earle warned Keen that Austin had, "too

⁹⁵ Shank, *Dissonant Identities*, 66-90.

⁹⁶ Skanse, "A Man Apart."

⁹⁷ Freeman, "Inside REK's Inner Sanctum."

⁹⁸ Don McLeese, "Robert Earl Keen - Straight Outta Bandera," *No Depression*, October 31, 1998, accessed November 19, 2016, <http://nodepression.com/article/robert-earl-keen-straight-outta-bandera>.

many pretty girls and too much cheap dope.”⁹⁹ Even before leaving Austin in 1985, Keen pushed to cultivate an audience outside of Texas. As early as 1981, Keen played small gigs in Chicago, New York City, and Berkeley’s esteemed folk mecca Freight and Salvage.¹⁰⁰ The Kerrville Folk Festival also provided an avenue for Keen to showcase his songwriting to a wider audience. Founded in 1972, the eighteen-day Hill Country campout focuses on songwriting and rejects the star system with nationally known artists swapping songs around campfires with novices. Created by Rod Kennedy, the festival has gained an international reputation and fostered the careers of songwriting talents such as Butch Hancock, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Joe Ely, Guy Clark, Townes Van Zandt, Steve Earle, Terri Hendrix, Lovett, Keen and many others.¹⁰¹ The Folk Festival immediately captured Keen's imagination. “I just packed up my little 63 Dodge Dart with everything and went out there with a pillow and guitar and slept on the ground,” Keen remembered fondly more than three decades later.¹⁰² In 1983, Keen won the festival’s prestigious “New Folk” award, joining previous winners Earle, Griffith, Tish Hinojosa, and his old friend Lovett.¹⁰³ Keen’s dream of making a living performing his own songs was taking shape.

⁹⁹ McLeese, “Straight Outta Bandera.”

¹⁰⁰ Jim King, “Robert Earl Keen and Jim King of the Road.”

¹⁰¹ E. R. Barefield, “The Kerrville Folk Festival and the Path to Kerr-Vision,” *The Journal of Texas Music History* 11, no. 1 (2011): 22-38.

¹⁰² Forster, “Episode #1643 Robert Earl Keen,”

¹⁰³ Doug Coppock, “Kerrville Folk Festival New Folk Finalist History,” Happenstance-Music, accessed April 1, 2017, http://www.happenstance-music.com/KFF_History.asp.

“Intelligent Lyrics”: *No Kinda Dancer* (1984)

The least commercial radio station in Austin at the time was 90.5 KUT. Operated by students and staff at the University of Texas, KUT played an eclectic mix of decidedly non-Top 40 cuts. Keen became fixated on the Saturday morning *Folkways* program and began to wonder if he made a record if the Folkways host might play it.¹⁰⁴ At the time, making a record without label support was a daunting task. The equipment necessary to record music with enough fidelity for a commercial release was enormously expensive and not readily available. Record producers and engineers with sufficient expertise typically worked with labels in high dollar studios as well. In the 1980s, however, the cost of making a record had fallen to the point where independent record labels had proliferated across the nation. The ubiquity of these often tiny alternatives to major labels is perhaps the most significant development in music of the decade. For example, both alternative rock and hip-hop hinged on independent label support. Even with this expansion of opportunities for non-label acts, self-produced records remained a rarity.¹⁰⁵

Guided by a book called *Making Your Own Record*, a gift from Lovett, Keen tapped friends and fans to support his debut release.¹⁰⁶ The ambitious artist drafted a prospectus explaining his plan and sent it to potential investors with a request for \$100 from each. Keen’s believers, supplemented by a \$2,000 loan from a supportive Aggie

¹⁰⁴ Matt Fink, “Legend: Robert Earl Keen,” *American Songwriter*, January 14, 2010, accessed January 27, 2017, <https://americansongwriter.com/2010/01/legends-robert-earl-keen/>.

¹⁰⁵ Matt Weitz, “Facing the Music,” *Dallas Observer*, January 29, 1998.

¹⁰⁶ Skanse, “A Man Apart.”

banker, provided the needed capital, and Keen headed to the studio.¹⁰⁷ Acting as his own producer, Keen booked time at a local studio and enlisted his musical family, including Griffith and Lovett, to play on the recording. Having produced his own album, he now needed to find label help for distribution and, hopefully, a little promotion. He shopped the record and was happy to lease his debut to Philo, an imprint of folk, blues, and bluegrass independent Rounder Records.¹⁰⁸ Released October 1, 1984, under the name Robert Earl Keen, Jr, *No Kinda Dancer* drew scant attention, although it did win Keen the *Austin Chronicle*'s Best Songwriter Award for 1984.¹⁰⁹

Billboard Magazine, which offered at least one-sentence reviews of every record release from any label no matter how small, opined, “engaging acoustic instrumentals and intelligent lyrics support Keen's impressive vocals.”¹¹⁰ Keen was initially pleased with this assessment of *No Kinda Dancer*, but he later realized that the phrase “intelligent lyrics” was simply a Nashville euphemism for a songwriter “going nowhere,” as his music would never be played on the radio.¹¹¹

“The Last Filling Station”: Visions of the Past and Present on *No Kinda Dancer*

The album kicks off with a title track featuring a narrator recalling a night spent at the sort of Bohemian Texas small town dances Keen used to frequent on his family's weekend trips to Columbus. Keen's date talks the singer into waltzing despite his

¹⁰⁷ Reid, “Cult of Keen.”

¹⁰⁸ Skanse, “A Man Apart.”

¹⁰⁹ Freeman, “Inside REK's Inner Sanctum.”

¹¹⁰ “No Kinda Dancer,” *Billboard Magazine* (November 3, 1983): 61.

¹¹¹ Don McLeese, “Straight Outta Bandera.”

protestations. His first recorded piece is about an outsider connecting to rural Texan traditions, a theme that runs through not only his work, but the work of those he would come to influence.¹¹²

The second track proved to be the most enduring and influential. One afternoon at the Church Street house Keen played an unfinished composition for Lovett, who was duly impressed. Sometime later, Lovett, despite only having heard the song once, played it back for Keen adding Lovett's own final verse.¹¹³ "The Front Porch Song" has come to symbolize the halcyon days when Keen and Lovett developed the musical talents and sensibilities that transformed Texas music, but the song itself is actually a celebration of the remains of a more agrarian Texas that surrounded them.¹¹⁴ The track is acoustic, featuring only stringed instruments. A choppy, percussive rhythm guitar keeping time replaces drums while a stand-up bass follows the guitar through alternately descending and ascending chord changes. A mandolin solos between verses, adding to the rustic charm. Even before the lyric begins, the song unmistakably evokes Texas's past.

The first verse relates the porch to an "old bull" in the decidedly rural South Texas hamlet of Agua Dulce whose "work is never done." Keen then turns his attention to the enchilada plate served in a pre-depression grand hotel. The third verse takes the listener to a movie palace whose last feature was *Giant* (1962).¹¹⁵ Here Keen makes a

¹¹² Robert Earl Keen Jr., "No Kinda Dancer," *No Kinda Dancer*, Philo, 1984, LP.

¹¹³ Hall, "The Secret History of Texas Music."

¹¹⁴ Langer, "A Bit of Banter."

¹¹⁵ Robert Earl Keen Jr., "The Front Porch Song," *No Kinda Dancer*, Philo, 1984, LP

subtle connection to McMurtry's *Last Picture Show*, whose young characters escape to the town's movie theater for the privacy to make out with their girlfriends.¹¹⁶ The closing of the theater referred to in the novel's title symbolizes the end of the character's innocence as well as the dying of a way of life.

Lovett's verse introduces the Church Street house landlord, Jack Boyette, "a weathered gray-haired seventy years of Texas/ whose doing all he can not to give into the city." Boyette lets Keen slide on his rent in exchange for help with his cattle. Lovett reflected in a *Texas Monthly* piece on great Texas songs, Boyette "would walk right in, make himself at home. But Robert treated him like he belonged there, and he'd go help him move his cattle or build a fence. I admired that."¹¹⁷ The lyric then turns more personal.

This old porch is just a long time
waiting and forgetting . . .
And remembering the falling down
And the laughter of the curse of luck
From all of those sons of bitches
Who said we'd never get back up.¹¹⁸

The song finishes by reprising the first verse suggesting a conflation of the bull, the old rancher, and the young songwriters themselves with an aside, "I've known a whole lot of old bulls in my life and their work is never done." Thirty years later, this early composition still holds a special place for the Texans. Lovett beamed, "I'm as proud of that verse as anything else I've ever written. I was able to say exactly how I felt." Keen

¹¹⁶ Larry McMurtry, *Last Picture Show*, New York: The Dial Press, 1966.

¹¹⁷ Hall, "The Secret History."

¹¹⁸ Keen, "The Front Porch Song."

agreed, “The song didn’t breathe until Lyle got to work on it.”¹¹⁹ For Keen, the song is a connection to his college days where he forged his own identity through Texas’s rich musical tradition. “I suppose the porch does have a meaning of its own now. It’s our Walden Pond—it takes you back to a simpler place, to where you can just hang out and be yourself around friends.”¹²⁰

To Keen’s musical descendants the porch on Church Street is a Garden of Eden, the birthplace of their musical genre during a time of innocence. It represents the simpler mythological past both Keen and McMurtry imagined in their pursuit of their lost Texanness. For these reasons, “The Front Porch Song” stands as the first great anthem of the Texas Country scene.¹²¹ This is particularly true for students of Texas A&M. For Keen and Lovett to not only emerge from the smaller College Station but to so publicly embrace their Aggie identities stoked an unrivaled passion among A&M alumni for the two songwriters.

The rest of the album established themes Keen and those he inspired would address over the coming decades. His dark, incisive wit is on display in “Swervin’ in My Lane” and “The Armadillo Jackal,” the former with a descant written and sung by Nanci Griffith. The most idiosyncratic tune on the album is the gothic “Christabel,” a supernatural tale of an ageless succubus who seduces a passing motorist. The occult themes did not establish a trend in Keen or later artists’ work, but “Christabel” and “The

¹¹⁹ Hall, “The Secret History.”

¹²⁰ Langer, “A Bit of Banter.”

¹²¹ Hall, “The Secret History.”

Armadillo Jackal” do stand as Keen’s first two recorded cinematic narratives which transcend the standard boy and girl romantic formula. These story songs with their vivid characters and relatively complicated plots became, along with his darkly comic work, Keen’s trademarks.

No Kinda Dancer also established what the central theme in Texas Country music and the most significant lyrical difference between the genre and its Nashville counterpart. Both Nashville and Texas Country music frequently focus on rural America and its denizens. Nashville music tends to celebrate contemporary rural America as a bastion of good values and idyllic living. Mainstream country songs often proclaim the virtues of small town life, implying or explicitly claiming it as superior to a more urban, modern lifestyle. Nadine Hubbs explores the lyrical content of Top 40 country in her study *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*, concluding, “country music is...the sound of working people, small-town America, and an idealized simpler time.”¹²² In the first half of the decade hits championing rural life over the corrupt city consistently topped the country chart. In Dolly Parton’s “Tennessee Homesick Blues” (1984) the narrator flees New York City to eat grits and gravy before loading up the hounds and catch a coon with dad in the backwoods. Don Reid’s “Child of the Fifties” (1982) bemoans the new America filled with income taxes and TV reruns. John Anderson’s “Swingin’” (1983) rode a catchy chorus built around an exaggerated southern drawl to number one. Hank Williams, Jr, an artist associated with the Outlaw Country movement, had turned rural resentment into a cottage industry by the early 1980s. Singles such as the platinum hit “A

¹²² Nadine Hubbs, *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 49.

Country Boy Can Survive” (1982) and “This Ain’t Dallas” (1984) stoked white rural resistance to an urban world perceived as increasingly alien.

Texas Country lyrics also frequently address rural themes, but their praise is almost universally limited to the agrarian past. Songwriters rarely show contemporary rural life as desirable and certainly not as a lifestyle fit for aspiration. Keen clearly articulates these ideas on his debut. “No Kinda Dancer” does present a rural dance as a charming, quaint setting but, the narrator is an outsider, hence his insistence he lacks the skills to dance to the music. “Willie” features Keen contemplating “a print I got from grandma/ a real West River cowgirl in her day.” While the western scene clearly fascinates Keen, he is just as clearly an outsider pondering a Texas heritage from which he feels separated. Keen also takes the opportunity to comment on the exploitation of his heritage, “And now the western feeling has become another sideshow/ a selling out the bygone days gone by.”¹²³

“Young Lover’s Waltz” tells a love story of “a boy called Caballo” wooing a girl at a dance featuring Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys. The presence of Wills both allows Keen to directly cite one of his major influences and fixes the setting in the first half of the 20th century. Interestingly, like Keen in the first track, the farm boy Caballo and his “blue girl” “weren’t much on dancing that old ballroom style,” although unlike Keen the pair did not hesitate to try.¹²⁴ “Death of Tail Fitzsimmons” is a rousing acoustic string band instrumental, which recalls an earlier epoch in Texas music even without

¹²³ Robert Earl Keen Jr., “Willie,” *No Kinda Dancer*, Philo, 1984, LP.

¹²⁴ Robert Earl Keen Jr., “Young Lover’s Waltz,” *No Kinda Dancer*, Philo, 1984, LP.

lyrics. The instrumental, like all the album's tracks, is recorded in a minimalist style. Due to the limits of the facilities and the budget, elaborate production effects were not an option. Even if they were, Keen's stage act and musical sensibilities at the time suggest he would have chosen the bare, stripped-down sound the album features. Each of these songs presents McMurtry's fading agrarian Texas past in nostalgic terms but keeps both Keen, as the narrator, and the listener at a distance in time. As much as Keen may admire and yearn for Texas's past, he never confuses it with the present.

The ninth track on the album turns its attention to contemporary rural Texas. Keen has described "Rollin' By" as "the kind of song [Lovett] would write."¹²⁵ Lovett liked the song enough to include it on *Step Inside This House* (1998), an album featuring Lovett covering his own influences. Keen's vision of a "busted old town on the plains of West Texas" is bleak. The town has been reduced to a dry river, a closed drug store, an abandoned mission, and a closed down drive-in, a second reference to McMurtry's *Last Picture Show*. Keen takes care to point out the "grave where the old cowboys lie," an acknowledgement that the characters from the earlier songs have faded away. Keen does not belong in the town, having simply pulled into "the last filling station" off the highway where "semis roll through like stainless steel stallions." Soon enough Keen, gazing on the ruins of the once mighty agrarian Texas past, is, "back out on the highway goin' hard, goin' fast, goin' by."¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Hall, "On the Front Porch with Robert and Lyle."

¹²⁶ Robert Earl Keen Jr., "Rollin' By," *No Kinda Dancer*, Philo, 1984, LP

This distinctive perspective marks the primary difference between Texas Country lyrics and the Top 40 sounds of Nashville. Brendon Anthony, Pat Green's longtime fiddle player and current head of the Texas Music Office, explained, "mainstream [country] seeks to glamorize small town life and present it in such a way that the songs nearly become anthems." Texas Country artists feel "the grittier side of rural life is just more interesting than the other. But, because it isn't necessarily uplifting or presented in a celebratory way, it isn't going to resonate with the passive listener." Anthony believes, "any one of the songwriters...could put together a 'back where I come from' anthem that would likely hit home with a larger audience. Fact is, that just isn't as interesting as talking through the details of a flameout local ready to end it all on the nightly news."¹²⁷

Keen's lyrics in songs such as "Young Lover's Waltz" and "Willie" distinguished themselves from mainstream country by being firmly rooted in the belief in McMurtry's preindustrial utopia. For progressive country songwriters, this rural utopia was, at times, presented as a place to escape to in the present as seen in songs such as Michael Martin Murphey's "Cosmic Cowboy Pt. 1" (1972) or Guy Clark's "L.A. Freeway" (1972). Keen and his musical descendants would no longer present an agrarian escape as a possibility. Contemporary rural life had little to offer college educated young Texans on the verge of the 21st century.

Anthony saw these elements in "Ruby's Two Sad Daughters," penned by Walt Wilkins but first recorded for Pat Green's *Carry On* (2001). To Anthony, whose haunting fiddle gives the track much of its atmosphere, it is the tale of "a town just verging on

¹²⁷ Brendon Anthony, e-mail to author, October 28, 2016.

blowing away in the next strong windstorm just speaks to a lot of the truth behind these small West Texas towns. Anything good has moved on, and those too young to make their own escape just simply hold onto other people's memories until they can break out and make their own."¹²⁸ Other examples from Green include "Trailer Park Tune" and "George's Bar," in which Green bemoans being trapped in Waco, too provincial for Green at over 100,000 residents. Ingram offered "Drive On" and "One Light Town," where the protagonist, tired of being "stuck down there," where, "nobody cares," is, "gonna leave this town behind him."¹²⁹ This rejection of the same small town lifestyle Nashville country embraced so enthusiastically is the primary thematic hallmark of Texas Country.

Notably, one of the earliest progressive country compositions to gain critical acclaim, Steve Fromholz's "Texas Trilogy" (1969), deals with similar themes as Texas Country but from the opposite perspective. "Texas Trilogy" presents the tiny town of Kopperl, Texas, as it struggles to survive the exodus of its younger generation to nearby, and not much larger, Cleburne. Fromholz's sympathies lie with the older, rural generation watching its progeny flee a pastoral way of life.¹³⁰ Thirty years later, Cleburne native and future Texas Country superstar Randy Rogers could not flee the confines of the town fast

¹²⁸ Anthony, e-mail to author, October 28, 2016.; Walt Wilkins, "Ruby's Two Sad Daughters," Performed by Pat Green. Green Horse. CD. 2001.

¹²⁹ Jack Ingram, "One Light Town," *Lonesome Questions*, 1994. CD.

¹³⁰ Steven Fromholz, "Texas Trilogy," performed by FrummoX, *Here to There*, Probe Records, 1969. LP.

enough.¹³¹ Unlike Fromholz's lyrical Cleburne, in "65 Degrees," Rogers wishes he, "could fly away and leave this town behind," depressed to realize, "Instead I'm stuck here, watching life slowly pass me by."¹³²

Green explores these same themes in songs such as "Adios Days" (1997) and "Galleywinter" (2001), a halcyon memoir of playing on his grandfather's ranch. If the distinction between the present and the past was not clear enough, both Green and Morrow employ lyrical time machines. Green teamed with Radney Foster to rerelease Foster & Lloyd's 1988 hit "Texas in 1880" in 2001. Morrow's "Texas Time Travellin'" (1996) was one of his earliest crowd pleasers. Keen's early urbane, educated fans and Texas Country collegiate, suburban audiences both saw contemporary rural America as something to mourn, not embrace.

Nashville: 1984-1987

From the beginning, Keen's personality shone through. His songwriting and determination impressed Tracie Ferguson, who regularly booked the fledgling performer in the front room at Gruene Hall for singer-songwriter shows. One night in 1984, Ferguson brought a friend to hear Keen's stories and songs at an Austin venue, Emma Jo's.¹³³ The friend, Kathleen Gray, was impressed with Keen's wit. On December 10 of that year, Griffith performed for the nationally renowned *Austin City Limits* PBS television program. After the show, a group of musicians and friends retreated a few

¹³¹ Rogers, interview.

¹³² Randy Rogers, "65 Degrees," *Live at Cheatham St. Warehouse*, Smith Music Group, 2000. CD.

¹³³ Skanse, "A Man Apart."

blocks south to the Texas Chili Parlor. Keen and Gray drank and chatted until last call. Keen asked Gray out and, for their first date, took her to ride the children's train around Zilker Park. In June 1985, Gray moved in with Keen.¹³⁴

After a half decade in Austin, Keen became restless. He had come to see the future "Live Music Capital of the World" as a "double edged-sword."¹³⁵ The luxury of being able to play music regularly and subsist sapped the will to find a broader audience. A chance meeting with Earle, where Earle imparted his "mañana" warning, encouraged Keen to try his hand in the higher risk-higher reward music market of Nashville, as Earle himself had.¹³⁶

Keen moved to Nashville in 1985, followed shortly by Kathleen. The two married and Kathleen thrived. She saw life with Robert Earl as an adventure, but the two struggled to support themselves. "I got great jobs but the hardest part was not having any money... We didn't pay any attention to it... we just had a great time together."¹³⁷ Keen quickly learned that while he had made money playing in Austin, Nashville was a different kind of scene. "I had to go audition to play three songs at songwriter night at the Bluebird Cafe. For free. And I was just totally indignant about it, like, "Are you kidding me?"¹³⁸ Keen was reduced to odd jobs to pay the bills including digging ditches, working

¹³⁴ Comanche Trace, "At Home in Texas."

¹³⁵ Freeman, "Inside REK's Inner Sanctum."

¹³⁶ McLeese, "Straight Outta Bandera."

¹³⁷ Comanche Trace, "At Home in Texas."

¹³⁸ Skanse. "A Man Apart."

in a print shop, temp work, and even landscaping country superstar Steve Wariner's yard in a torrential downpour.¹³⁹ For Keen, the low point came while he was digging a ditch and recalled his father had warned him this would be the result of pursuing music as a career.¹⁴⁰

Musical stardom eluded Keen in Nashville. What had worked in Austin, Houston and other Texas venues was poorly suited for Nashville. Austin and Nashville draw frequent comparisons and one illustrative feature is the nature of the live music scene audience. In Nashville, most artists are performing in the hopes that an influential figure in the recording industry will be impressed enough to champion the artist to a label. Therefore, playing two or three songs during lunch to a handful of disinterested diners for no pay makes sense. The incentive is that one of the few people in the room might be an artist and repertoire man or an assistant to someone important or some other well-connected fan who will talk the artist up. Performers attempt to showcase what might sound like a radio hit sung in a radio friendly voice.

In Austin, particularly in the 1980s, this would have been an absurd fantasy. In a market with virtually no label presence, the performer played almost exclusively at night in venues dependent on alcohol sales. The artist's goal was to connect with as large an audience as possible and build a following. Performers gave little thought to winning over one fan that would unlock the key to stardom. Sets were long, and artists developed live shows designed to cultivate a sustainable party atmosphere that might encourage fans

¹³⁹ Reid, "Cult of Keen."

¹⁴⁰ John Spong, "Pitch Perfect," *Texas Monthly*, August 2009.

to buy some music, mention the artist to friends, and show up at the next show. Keen's talents, as well as his evolution to fit the Austin scene, made him a poor candidate for Nashville stardom.

Even Keen's successes in Nashville turned to failure. When a Waylon Jennings funded foundation awarded Keen free studio time, the critique was devastating. "They couldn't believe somebody would even submit this as a song. There's no hook," Keen recalled to Jan Reid.¹⁴¹ Keen's songwriting had won over small rooms in Austin and his future wife, but Nashville record labels were interested in hit radio songs. "I was trying to write what I thought were hit songs, and they were terrible. I'd demo them, and pitch them, and I knew they were terrible."¹⁴² Keen's dream of finding his place in country music was unraveling.¹⁴³ His frustration was complicated by the success of his friends.

The Class of 1986

By the early 1980s, Tony Brown had worked his way up to producing records for MCA in Nashville. His musical bona fides include playing keyboards for Elvis Presley and Emmylou Harris's Hot Band.¹⁴⁴ Harris first gained wide attention for *Grievous Angel* (1974), her album of duets recorded with country rock pioneer Gram Parsons. Released shortly after Parsons's death from a drug overdose, the album earned Harris her own recording contract, which she parlayed into eight Top 10 country albums between 1974

¹⁴¹ Reid, "Cult of Keen."

¹⁴² McLeese, "Straight Out of Bandera."

¹⁴³ Fink, "Legend: Robert Earl Keen."

¹⁴⁴ Saviano, "Without Getting Killed or Caught," 197.

and 1981. She was widely admired for her eclectic material and country rock roots, which gained her significant adoration in progressive and alternative country circles.¹⁴⁵ As a member of her Hot Band, Brown became convinced there was an audience for a more thoughtful, less pop-oriented country sound. As a producer, Brown determined to make this vision a reality.¹⁴⁶

Dubbed the class of '86, Brown's discoveries challenged mainstream country music's status quo. Under Brown's production, Earle, Griffith, Lovett, and fellow Hot Band alum Rodney Crowell each charted hit albums over the next two years. Joined by other artists such as Ohioan Dwight Yoakam, who revived the upbeat rock-infused Bakersfield sound of Buck Owens and new traditionalist Randy Travis, Brown's Texas roster appeared to mark a dramatic broadening of sonic possibilities in country music's formulaic capital city. In the end, commercial country music proved too resistant to Brown's vision to change significantly, but the artists he helped launch would each go on to successful careers and become important foundations for offshoots of country music such as alt.country, Americana, and Texas Country.¹⁴⁷ Through Harris and Crowell, Brown had become acquainted with the circle of Texas ex-pats who spent their free hours

¹⁴⁵ Jason Ankeny, "Emmylou Harris Artist Biography," *Allmusic.com*. accessed May 5, 2017, <http://www.allmusic.com/artist/emmylou-harris-mn0000159699/biography>.

¹⁴⁶ Shirley Jenkins, "New Country Stars Didn't Stay in Saddle Long," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, September 28, 1996.

¹⁴⁷ Jenkins, "New Country Stars."

at Guy and Susanna Clark's Nashville home. Brown successfully mined Clark's social circle to produce what appeared, at the time, to be a country music revolution.¹⁴⁸

Unlike the others, Crowell was an established artist with the Brown-produced *Diamonds and Dirt* (1987) being his fifth release. Unlike Crowell's earlier efforts, *Diamonds and Dirt* established Crowell as a superstar, sending each of the five singles to number one on the country charts and earning a gold record for the album. Among the chart toppers was "She's Crazy for Leaving," which Crowell co-wrote with his mentor Clark, the last of Clark's three number one songwriting credits. Crowell and Brown's collaboration presented a more mainstream sound than Earle, Griffith or Lovett's efforts.¹⁴⁹

Earle's 1986 MCA debut *Guitar Town* shot to the top of the country charts despite its significant rock elements. *Guitar Town* still regularly appears on the *Rolling Stone* Top 500 albums list. Earle followed with a string of successful albums combining his love of country, bluegrass, and metal that have made him an oft-cited influence among songwriters and artists seeking to create music to challenge mainstream country. Appearing as a regular cast member on David Simon's critically acclaimed HBO series *The Wire* and *Treme* further raised Earle's profile.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Saviano, "Without Getting Killed or Caught," 197-8.

¹⁴⁹ Holly Gleason, "Wisdom & Poetry: The Mastery of Rodney Crowell," *East Nashvillian*, March/April, 2017, 50-60, 104.

¹⁵⁰ Jim Macnie, "Steve Earle Bio," *Rolling Stone*. accessed May 1, 2017, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/artists/steve-earle/biography>

Griffith had released four independent albums before working with Brown at MCA. These early efforts earned Griffith songwriting credits on major stars' albums, including a cut on Dolly Parton's *Real Love* (1985). Two of Griffith's songs from *Last of the True Believers* (1986) charted for Kathy Mattea over the next year with "Love at the Five and Dime" reaching number 3 and "Goin' Gone" topping the country chart in 1987. These successes established Griffith as a songwriter and earned her a major label deal. In 1987, Griffith's *Lone Star State of Mind* peaked at number 23 on the country charts with the title track cracking the Top 40. The final track on the first side is Griffith's version of Keen's "Sing One for Sister." The next year Griffith covered Keen's "I Would Change My Life" on *Little Love Affairs* (1988). Griffith's covers of her friend's songs are indicative of other artists' respect for Keen as a writer.¹⁵¹

Keen's closest musical companion took a circuitous path to national stardom. Lovett, whose confidence had inspired Keen, had stayed in college seven years because he preferred to describe himself as a college student rather than a struggling musician. Tired of playing the same handful of clubs around Texas, Lovett accepted an offer from Billy Williams, a musician he met while playing in Luxembourg. Travelling to Williams' base of Phoenix, Lovett used Williams' band to record a demo cassette. In 1984, Lovett abandoned the blues-rock filled bars of Texas to try his luck in Nashville. While shopping the cassette around town, Lovett made a point to drop one at Clark's publishing company with a note explaining his admiration for the Texas songwriter. Amazingly, the

¹⁵¹ Kathryn Jones, "Roots of Steel: The Poetic Grace of Women Texas Singer-Songwriters," in *Pickers & Poets, The Ruthlessly Poetic Songwriters of Texas*, ed. Craig Clifford and Craig D. Hillis (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2016) 120-1..

tape made its way to Clark. Even more amazingly, Clark actually took the time to listen. Clark was remarkable for his willingness to tout unknown songwriters such as Earle and Crowell, and he added Lovett to the list despite having never met him. Clark explained, “I was making everyone listen to it. I was just obsessed.” When the two finally met in person, Clark remembered, “I took one look at him and pegged him for a French blues singer. I went on and sat down and then finally lights and bells went off. *That’s* the guy who left me all those incredible songs.”¹⁵²

Clark’s boosterism landed Lovett a publishing deal and the chance to make a record at MCA with Brown. *Lyle Lovett* (1986) found both critical and commercial success. Hitting number 16 on the country chart, the Nashville establishment embraced the album’s quirky songwriting, jazz, and rock informed country sounds. The album also features Lovett’s slow, reflective version of “The Front Porch Song,” another major label songwriting credit for Keen. As Lovett’s star rose with an even more well received follow up, *Pontiac* (1987), Keen found himself relegated to Lovett’s entourage. Keen struggled with being both happy for his friends yet also feeling left behind.¹⁵³ The differences between Austin and Nashville hurt him. In Austin, musicians had supported each other and worked together, while in Nashville, “everybody went off on their own, and it was a real life lesson.”¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² Reid, *Improbable*.

¹⁵³ Reid, “Cult of Keen.”

¹⁵⁴ Freeman, “Inside REK’s Inner Sanctum.”

Aside from Keen's "intelligent lyrics," which one A&R person described as "Jerry Jeff, Billy Joe Shaver, same old shit," Keen's voice was found wanting.¹⁵⁵ Critics frequently described Keen's baritone as flat and nasal. Even more problematic for Nashville labels his "voice can roam so far off key that whiskey jiggers rattle."¹⁵⁶ When asked who the next big thing to come out of Texas would be in the early 1980s, Kerville Folk Festival founder Rod Kennedy singled out Keen, despite Lovett's and Griffith's recent major label signings, but Keen found himself left out of Nashville's Class of 1986.¹⁵⁷

In January of 1987, Keen's car broke down in Missouri after a show in Kansas. After spending the last of their money to get the car fixed, the Keens arrived in Nashville to find thieves had raided their apartment. While freezing on the roadside in Missouri, Keen had watched as Earle's tour bus zoomed by. "It seemed like an omen, because Steve was the guy who talked me into going to Nashville in the first place!" Four days later, the Keens left Tennessee, an episode Keen later put in verse sentimentally in "Leaving Tennessee" and comically in "Then Came Lo Mein." Keen's failure in Nashville, particularly in light of his colleagues' astonishing success, left him bitter, depressed, and seriously considering giving up his musical dreams.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ McLeese, "Straight Outta Bandera."

¹⁵⁶ Reid, "Cult of Keen."

¹⁵⁷ Clifford, *Pickers & Poets*, 139.

¹⁵⁸ Robert Claypool, "He Isn't Keen on Nashville," *Houston Chronicle*, December 28, 1988.

Despite his apparent failure, Keen left Music City with crucial ingredients of his future success and the foundation of the legend Texas Country fans constructed around him. Keen had signed a publishing deal with MCA Nashville that supplemented his income. Perhaps more importantly, he had impressed booking agent Keith Case enough to be signed to Case's agency. Case booked Clark, Van Zandt, and other singer-songwriter acts into intimate listening rooms and made Keen a staple of that circuit.¹⁵⁹

Ironically, Keen's failure to find a permanent place in Nashville is part of what made him so influential in the Texas Country scene. While Clark, Van Zandt, Lovett, and Earle were all considered major influences in Texas Country, they lacked the immediacy of Keen to fans in Texas. Texas Country fans viewed the progressive country era as a rejection of the music and values Nashville represented. Despite the fact that major labels had backed virtually every recognizable name in the earlier scene, fans viewed progressive country as a homegrown Texan antidote to the more commercial Nashville sound.¹⁶⁰ Central to the myth of Willie Nelson is his rejection of a successful songwriting career in Nashville in favor of making the music he wanted in Austin.¹⁶¹ Despite the fact Nelson left by choice and Keen left out of desperation, the two artists' stories mirrored each other and lent credence to the notion that escaping Music City for the Lone Star State freed each to make a more authentic brand of music specifically tailored for Texans.

¹⁵⁹ Saviano, "Without Getting Killed or Caught," 225. Nelson perceived rejection of Nashville was, at most, limited. The superstar remained a major label artist and continued to record in Nashville with session musicians throughout his long career.

¹⁶⁰ Brian Rung, interview with author, February 27, 2016.

¹⁶¹ Reid, *Improbable Rise*, 283-297.

As Brian Zintgraff, an early college-age Keen fan explained, “He was accessible, that was *our* guy.”¹⁶² Keen’s unsuccessful bid to make Top 40 country music allowed a new generation of Texans to view Keen as “theirs” and fulfill the postmodern need to view consumption as a personal experience.

Keen’s relative anonymity, as compared to his more successful cohort in the Class of 1986, propelled Keen to regional superstardom in a simpler way as well. While Keen’s major label colleagues toured widely, playing high dollar venues before hushed crowds, Keen was forced to play frequently around Texas in a more diverse set of venues at much lower ticket prices. This material reality meant Keen’s growing college-aged fan base could see Keen often at affordable prices, greatly increasing the fans’ sense of ownership in Keen. Lovett, Earle, and others, regularly touring internationally, played any given market in Texas infrequently and were able to charge significantly more when they did. Consequently, even young fans who enjoyed these bigger stars’ music were unlikely to get to see these national acts. This immediacy was a necessary element in forming a neo-progressive country Texan identity for a postmodern generation who demanded a more personalized commodity.¹⁶³

“A Hole in Your Soul Where the Wind Blows Through”: 1987-1989

The Keens retreated to the Texas Hill Country town of Bandera, where Kathleen’s parents lived. The Grays helped the couple buy a dilapidated vacant home and gave

¹⁶² Brian Zintgraff, interview.

¹⁶³ Brian Zintgraff, interview.; Michael Kilian, interview.; Brandon Allen, interview with author, Lufkin, May 12, 2017.

Kathleen a job in a nursing home they owned.¹⁶⁴ Robert Earl worked construction and battled depression over the end of his music career. His new surroundings did not help. "I had never really been to Bandera, and came down here on a day when it was cold, 30-mile-per-hour wind, all blue sky, and no sun at all. There were about two cars parked on all of Main Street and tin cans bumping down the middle of the road. I thought, 'I have come to the end of my life.'" Soon, freed from the need to fit into the Nashville mold, Keen began to write new songs.¹⁶⁵ After five months of "sitting around with my head in my hands," Gruene Hall's Mary Jane Nalley called and offered Keen a regular spot in the venerable dance hall's front room. Keen equivocated, reasoning, "I didn't want to overexpose myself. Maybe I'll play once.' It was possibly the stupidest thing I have ever said." Coming to his senses, Keen called back and agreed to play twice a week through the summer of 1987. Joined by his fiddle-playing childhood friend Duckworth, Keen's career resurrected his career in the oldest continually operated dance hall in Texas.¹⁶⁶

By 1988, Case had begun booking Keen not only around Texas but also around the country, including shows opening for Guy Clark.¹⁶⁷ Soon Keen felt his live show was strong enough to record for his second album. After Rounder Records countered Keen's paltry request of \$9,500 with an offer of \$3,000 to produce the record, Keen turned to Sugar Hill for his second release.¹⁶⁸ Founded in 1980, North Carolina-based Sugar Hill

¹⁶⁴ Reid, "Cult of Keen."

¹⁶⁵ McLeese, "Straight Out of Bandera."

¹⁶⁶ Comanche Trace, "At Home in Texas."

¹⁶⁷ Saviano, "Without Getting Killed or Caught," 212.

¹⁶⁸ Claypool, "He Isn't Keen on Nashville."

Records specialized in bluegrass and folk and, like Keen himself, became a pioneer in the Americana genre in the 1990s.¹⁶⁹ Having recently released albums for both Van Zandt, *At My Window* (1987), and Clark, *Old Friends* (1988), Keen was a natural fit for the label.¹⁷⁰

“Thick and Goey”: *The Live Album* (1988)

Keen chose the Sons of Hermann Hall in Dallas, a 200-seat listening room, as the venue for *The Live Album* (1988). The album features only acoustic stringed instruments including Keen’s guitar, Roy Huskey Jr.’s upright bass, and Johnathan Yadkin switching between fiddle, mandolin, and guitar. *Billboard Magazine* found Keen, “droll and immensely personable,” on his sophomore effort.¹⁷¹ The *Houston Chronicle* praised the release, observing that the album “showcases Keen’s sensitive songwriting, his hilarious wit and his easygoing approach to performing.”¹⁷² Writing in the *Austin American-Statesman*, Casey Monahan, who would go on to head the Texas Music Office from 1991 to 2015, appreciated Keen’s “lyrical web...thick and goey...like the enchiladas he sings about in this old porch.”¹⁷³

¹⁶⁹ Reid, “Cult of Keen.”

¹⁷⁰ Guy Clark, *Old Friends*, Sugar Hill, 1988, CD.; Townes Van Zandt, *At My Window*, Sugar Hill, 1987, CD.

¹⁷¹ “The Live Album,” *Billboard Magazine* (January 14, 1989): 61.

¹⁷² Claypool, “He Isn’t Keen on Nashville.”

¹⁷³ Casey Monahan, “Austin City Limits Spotlights Local Talent,” *Austin American-Statesman*, March 31, 1989.

The reverence for and disconnection with Texas rural past is even more present on *The Live Album* than on *No Kinda Dancer*.¹⁷⁴ Keen begins the album with “I Wanna Know,” a track co-written with Fred Koller. In the lyric, Keen implores an elder to tell him about the past. The chorus makes plain Keen’s fascination with an earlier time:

I wanna know
Did your father own an automobile?
Or a two-horse carriage with wood spoke wheels?
I hear you used to walk to school seven miles a day
Did you ever ride a railroad train?
And the very first time you saw a plane
Did you think the world had gone insane?¹⁷⁵

From the first track of the album Keen makes clear that while he is interested in an earlier time, he does not pretend to be a part of it himself, highlighting the difference between his lyrics and Top 40 country, which tends to be written from the point of view of rural Americans.

Artists record live albums for two reasons. The first is live recordings tend to be cheaper than studio efforts. The second is an attempt to capture the energy and excitement of a performer’s live show.¹⁷⁶ Keen’s second track on *The Live Album* established the artist’s on-stage persona and make his live shows legendary. Storytelling on concert albums is not uncommon, but typically it occurs before the song, allowing

¹⁷⁴ Robert Earl Keen Jr., *The Live Album*, Sugar Hill, 1988, LP.

¹⁷⁵ Robert Earl Keen, Jr. and Fred Koller, “I Wanna Know,” *The Live Album*, Sugar Hill, 1988, LP.

¹⁷⁶ Will DuPuy, Interview by author, Austin, TX, December 2, 2016.

fans to hear the song itself as often as they like without hearing the story attached to it repeatedly. On the live version of “The Front Porch Song,” Keen engages in an extended retelling of the events surrounding the song’s composition between the second and third verses, as was his regular practice. The laughter of the crowd establishes the atmosphere of Keen’s live show and the story itself connects him to Lovett, who was a major star at the time, and Texas A&M University, whose students and alumni formed a significant portion of Keen’s early fan base.¹⁷⁷

The album also includes stories before “Copenhagen,” a tongue-in-cheek ode to snuff, and in the middle of “The Bluegrass Widow.”¹⁷⁸ The latter, a song made entirely from stringing the names of classic bluegrass songs together, is interrupted by a story of the Front Porch Boys finishing second in a bluegrass festival in Crockett (Keen claims, “the other two bands finished first and third respectively.”)¹⁷⁹ Another track from the record, “Goin’ Down in Style,” which tells the tale of a ne’er-do-well who steals his father’s Cadillac and makes a run for the Mexican border, appear as a cover on Pat Green’s first album.¹⁸⁰ Songs such as these, with their comic anecdotes filled with regional references, helped make Keen a favorite among college-aged fans in the years to come while the album’s more serious material, most notably “I’ll Go on Downtown,” gained him admiration in folk circles.

¹⁷⁷ Robert Earl Keen, “The Front Porch Song,” *The Live Album*, Sugar Hill, 1988, LP.

¹⁷⁸ Robert Earl Keen, “Copenhagen,” *The Live Album*, Sugar Hill, 1988, LP.

¹⁷⁹ Robert Earl Keen, “The Bluegrass Widow,” *The Live Album*, Sugar Hill, 1988, LP.

¹⁸⁰ Pat Green, *Dancehall Dreamer*, Green Horse Records, 1995, CD.

Texas Country artists attempted to emulate Keen's comic tone with varying degrees of success. Stories and banter in between songs was nearly ubiquitous among Keen's disciples. Roger Creager's regional hit, "Everclear" (1998), is a nearly line-for-line reworking of "Copenhagen," with only the particular vice changed. Green's "West Texas Holiday" (1995) attempts to do for hunting, complete with a Keen name drop, what Keen did for fishing with "Five Pound Bass" (1989). Green's *George's Bar* (1997) features "Trailer Park Tune" and "1-900 Lover," the true tale of one of David Henry's addictions for fans of broad comedy.¹⁸¹

"Undeniably Human": West Textures (1989)

The spring of 1989 was a prolific period for Keen. Aside from releasing his second record, he was one of three founding partners in Austin-based Watermelon Records, and appeared for the first time, albeit as one of many in a song swap, on *Austin City Limits*.¹⁸² Capitalizing on this momentum on one of his regular trips to Nashville, Keen spent two days recording a studio follow up to the *Live Album*. After sitting on the completed album for five months, Sugar Hill released *West Textures* on November 10, 1989. Keen's third album was the first to receive significant attention in the local press, earning four stars and being praised as "a testament to the songwriter's honesty and eloquence." Keen's voice, too ordinary for Nashville, was recast as, "undeniably human."¹⁸³ Keen's warbling baritone now enhanced his "honest, eloquent" lyrics

¹⁸¹ David Henry, interview.

¹⁸² Casey Monahan, "New Local Record Label Signs Lounge Lizards," *Austin American Statesman*, May 27, 1989.; Monahan, "Austin City Limits Spotlights Local Talent."

¹⁸³ Peter Blackstock, "Keen's *West Textures* is a Testament to the Songwriter's Honesty, Eloquence," *Austin American-Statesman*, November 30, 1989.

because, as the Talking Heads' David Byrne once explained, "the better a singer's voice, the harder it is to believe what they're saying."¹⁸⁴

In Monahan's interview with Keen about the new record, both the journalist and the artist discussed the album's potential success in terms of getting Nashville artists to cover the tracks. Two ballads, "Leaving Tennessee" and "Love's a Word I Never Throw Around," were considered strong candidates. Keen's latest, Monahan claims, has placed the artist in the rarified company of esteemed songwriters such as Clark, Van Zandt, and Butch Hancock. Keen was hopeful his new writing would help him shed his "frivolous" image and be taken "seriously" by Nashville as a songwriter. In the 1980s and for much of the 1990s, success for writers such as Clark and Van Zandt meant publishing royalties earned from appearing on major label records. These artists did not draw well and had little chance of radio exposure performing their own songs. Keen and Monahan's conversation makes it clear *West Textures* was not expected to build a following for Keen, but rather to raise his profile in the country music business. Neither *Statesman* piece even mentioned the album's second track, a modern day gunfighter ballad called "The Road Goes on Forever."¹⁸⁵

"The Road Goes on Forever" came to be Keen's most widely known and enthusiastically received song as well as, "quite possibly the best-known anthem in Texas music since Jerry Jeff Walker introduced both Gary P. Nunn's 'London Homesick Blues'

¹⁸⁴ Peter Hook, *Substance: Inside New Order*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2017), 3.

¹⁸⁵ Casey Monahan, "Keen Releases Solid *West Textures*," *Austin American-Statesman*, October 28, 1989.

and Ray Wylie Hubbard's 'Up Against the Wall (Redneck Mother).'"¹⁸⁶ Generally considered the greatest Texas Country song of all time, Keen's magnum opus tells the tale of Sherry, a cocktail waitress who falls for a small time drug dealer, flees to Miami, and murders a cop to save her new man.¹⁸⁷ Her beau, Sonny, takes the fall, and we last see Sherry driving down Main Street in a new Mercedes. The lyric's eight verses, each ending with, "the road goes on forever and the party never ends," play out like a "little movie," what Jan Reid called "an Elmore Leonard novel boiled down into a five-minute essence of hard luck, love and betrayal."¹⁸⁸

According to Keen, the song was less a result of inspiration than desperation. Sugar Hill producer Jim Rooney felt the album's original batch of songs lacked an "anchor" track and suggested Keen cancel the session. Not wanting to lose the studio time, Keen spent that evening working up the song.¹⁸⁹ "I just started with this woman that worked with Kathleen and she was with this guy that was real rough. No matter what good luck landed on them, they would manage to screw it all up."¹⁹⁰ Rooney was impressed enough with Keen's "hapless, updated Bonnie and Clyde," and the recording

¹⁸⁶ Skanse, "A Man Apart."

¹⁸⁷ "The Road Goes on Forever" is listed as the top Texas Country song of all time on every list I can find. Three examples: McCarthy, Amy and Kelly Dearmore, "The 50 Best Red Dirt Texas Country Songs," *Dallas Observer*, February 16, 2016.; "The Best Texas Country Songs," Ranker.com, accessed May 9, 2017, <http://www.ranker.com/list/best-texas-country-songs/ranker-music>; "Top 100 Greatest Texas Country Songs," Texas Country Lyrics Blog, (June 29, 2012), accessed May 9, 2017, <http://txcountrylyrics.com/blog/?p=42>.

¹⁸⁸ Robert Earl Keen, "The Road Goes on Forever," *West Textures*, Sugar Hill, 1989, CD.; Skanse, "A Man Apart."; Reid, "Cult of Keen."

¹⁸⁹ Skanse, "A Man Apart."

¹⁹⁰ Comanche Trace, "At Home in Texas."

session continued.¹⁹¹ It is ironic that this particular song, one written for explicitly commercial reasons at the behest of a label, albeit an independent one, would become the first and greatest anthem for the Texas Country scene. In the early years of the scene, the artists and fans explicitly viewed their musical movement as a rejection of corporate and record label involvement in the creative process, even going so far as to chant, and even print t-shirts, declaring, “Nashville Sucks.” With the exception of Keen, all of the early albums of Ingram, Green, Morrow, and virtually every other Texas Country act in the 1990s were independent releases with no label or corporate input.¹⁹²

A third way in which Keen influenced the songwriters of the Texas Country scene, along with his dark, comic songs and perspective on rural Texas, was through his story songs. Story songs with one line choruses are generally not built for success on radio or in honky-tonks.¹⁹³ These media are not conducive to songs where listeners must follow each verse to understand the song and lack a recognizable chorus for casual listeners. These songs work best on recordings or in quiet listening rooms, the sort Keen had become accustomed to playing. Yet Keen’s rowdiest crowds routinely sang along to every word of these complex tales.¹⁹⁴ Songs that tell stories are part of a long Texas songwriting tradition. For Keen, this stretches back to his childhood and Marty Robbins

¹⁹¹ Reid, “Cult of Keen.”

¹⁹² Chris Knight, “Episode 1: Pat Green and Cory Morrow,” *Inside Texas Country*, Lone Star 93.3 KXMG, March 4, 2000.

¹⁹³ Story songs are certainly not unknown in other genres and even occasionally break through to nationwide, major label success, such as Gordon Lightfoot’s “The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald” and Bob Dylan’s “Tangled Up in Blue.”

¹⁹⁴ Reid, “Cult of Keen.”

gunfighter ballads. Clark and Van Zandt, Keen's "mentors," were masters of story songs as evidenced by Clark's "Desperadoes Waiting for a Train" and "The Last Gunfighter Ballad" and Van Zandt's "Pancho and Lefty" and "Tecumseh Valley."¹⁹⁵ His lyrical short stories carried this tradition forward, inspiring a new generation to try their hand at the craft.

Keen claimed his interest lies primarily in narrative songs such as "The Road Goes on Forever."¹⁹⁶ His home state inspired these musical stories. "The sense of place here, for me, has always been about openness—not only the landscape, but the people. It always seems a little more edgy, a little more frontier-like."¹⁹⁷ Keen's narratives played out like, "little four minute movies," and were rich with subtext, characterization, and implied endings.¹⁹⁸ His young fans, who found mainstream country lyrics insulting to their intelligence, appreciated "The Road Goes on Forever" along with the rest of Keen's canon of short stories set to music as literature.¹⁹⁹

The song became so foundational to the Texas Country music scene that in 1997, at Nephew's bar on the square in San Marcos, I watched the opening band close their set and then the headliner open *and* close with "The Road." The audience greeted each of the

¹⁹⁵ Fink, "Legend: Robert Earl Keen."

¹⁹⁶ Dan Solomon, "Exclusive Q&A: Robert Earl Keen Explains Why He's Going Bluegrass on His New Album," *Texas Monthly*, (October 29, 2014), accessed February 14, 2017, <http://www.texasmonthly.com/the-daily-post/exclusive-qa-robert-earl-keen-explains-why-hes-going-bluegrass-on-his-new-album/>

¹⁹⁷ Basse, "TH Moment."

¹⁹⁸ Skanse, "A Man Apart."; Gray, "One More Image."

¹⁹⁹ Reid, "Improbable Rise."

three performances with wild applause and mass sing-a-longs. In these early days, virtually every artist covered the track at every show. Cory Morrow even developed elaborate hand gestures to illustrate the plot during the numerous instances when he was sharing the vocals with other artists.

Texas Country artists filled their sets and albums with story songs inspired by, or even written by, Keen. Ingram covered “The Road Goes on Forever” on his first album, and Green put “Goin’ Down in Style” on his debut.²⁰⁰ By 2001, before Texas Country broke nationally with Green’s *Wave on Wave*, almost every artist associated with the genre had recorded at least one story song. Many of these compositions shared the “Road’s” themes of desperate, marginalized people and violence.

²⁰⁰ Jack Ingram, *Jack Ingram*, Crystal Clear, 1992, CD.; Pat Green, *Dancehall Dreamer*, Green Horse, 1995, CD.

IV: 1990-1997

Folk Heroes: 1990-1993

After three albums and a decade of playing music professionally, Keen had established himself as a rising star in the folk scene, routinely selling out small listening rooms such as the University of Texas 150-seat Cactus Café.²⁰¹ Nashville-based booking agent Case sent Keen across America, and even to Europe, in 1990, and again in 1991, opening for Guy Clark and Townes Van Zandt, two of Keen's heroes. These shows thrilled Keen because they gave him an opportunity to watch two of his idols, the audiences "would sit there completely quiet" for the entire show, and he would sell \$700 to \$800 a night in merchandise.²⁰²

Clark, a tireless mentor of rising songwriters, got along well with Keen, but Van Zandt "was just aloof." In fact, one reason Case put Keen on the tour was Van Zandt's inability to rent a car due to the legendary folk singer's itinerant, addiction-plagued lifestyle. As he had for his sister two decades earlier, Keen served as Van Zandt's driver, but the passenger did not socialize and impressed Keen with his ability to sit perfectly still for long periods of time. Still Keen was grateful to see Van Zandt, "in the last great period when he was relatively sober," before the composer of "Pancho and Lefty" and "If I Needed You" succumbed to health problems stemming from his various addictions on New Year's Day, 1997.²⁰³

²⁰¹ Monahan, "Keen Releases Solid *West Textures*."

²⁰² Saviano, "Killed or Caught," 218, 225.

²⁰³ Skanse, "A Man Apart."

By 1991, in San Antonio, near his Bandera home, Keen had begun to consistently sell out the small venues he headlined thanks largely to airplay on Hill Country radio stations KRIO and KFAN: Texas Rebel Radio. The *San Antonio Express-News* even declared Keen “the Guy Clark of the 90s.”²⁰⁴ Keen pointed to this period as a turning point in his career. A member of Case’s staff, Denise Stiff, dreamed up a “World Tour of San Antonio” for Keen, which consisted of five shows in five different venues around the Alamo City, including Gruene Hall and Floore’s Country Store. Keen recalled the first gig of the series at El Patio Mexican Restaurant on October 16, 1991.²⁰⁵ “I could barely get to the front door, and I asked some guy at the back of the line ‘What’s the deal?’ And the guy said ‘This guy Robert Earl Keen is going to play.’ So I said ‘You’ve got to be kidding me.’ There were at least 1500 people there. And it was truly the power of radio.”²⁰⁶

In the singer-songwriter circle Keen inhabited, his peers had also benefited from radio play, but from other artists’ covers of their work. Clark’s claim to fame largely rested on two Jerry Jeff Walker covers, “Desperados Waiting for a Train” and “L.A. Freeway.” Van Zandt’s most famous compositions were “If I Needed You,” a 1981 hit for Don Wilson and Emmylou Harris, and “Pancho and Lefty,” which topped the country chart for Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard in 1983. Now it was Keen’s turn to play

²⁰⁴ C. J. Berkman, “Night Lights: Electric Shaver Heads Country/Swing Invasion,” *San Antonio Express-News*, February 22, 1991.; Jim Beal Jr., “Night Lights: Willie to Wail from the Floore, Wednesday,” *San Antonio Express-News*, July 23, 1991.

²⁰⁵ Jim Beal Jr., “Country Singer Brings His ‘World Tour’ to San Antonio,” *San Antonio Express-News*, October 15, 1991.

²⁰⁶ Comanche Trace, “At Home in Texas.”

songsmith for more well-known artists. Keen attended a song swap in 1991 featuring John Hiatt, Guy Clark, Lyle Lovett, and Joe Ely. Lovett invited Keen onstage to play a song. Ely recalled, “I had never met him before, but he played ‘The Road Goes on Forever,’ and as soon as he finished it, I said, ‘I’m recording that. I don’t care what you say.’ Then he played me another one, ‘Whenever Kindness Fails,’ and I said, ‘I’ve got to do that one, too!’” True to his word, both tracks appear on Ely’s 1992 MCA release *Love and Danger*.²⁰⁷ Ely’s cover of “The Road” was followed a month later by Ingram’s version and it is the title track of country super-group The Highwaymen’s third album, released in 1995. This last cover features Keen’s early hero Willie Nelson, along with Johnny Cash, Waylon Jennings, and Kris Kristofferson, on Keen’s most well-known song.

“I Felt a Part of It”: The Beginnings of the Texas Country Scene

David and Robert Henry grew up in the wealthy incorporated enclave of Alamo Heights, tucked away in North Central San Antonio where their father served as the Spurs team doctor. The brothers grew up as close friends with two immediate neighbors, Stephen Harris and Brian Zintgraff. Like almost every musician and fan interviewed for this work, their parents had exposed them to progressive country in the 1970s but they had little interest in the mainstream country of the 1980s and 1990s. Upon graduating high school, David Henry and Zintgraff moved to Lubbock to attend Texas Tech while Robert Henry and Harris chose SMU in Dallas. Before leaving San Antonio, the friends had begun listening to Keen and a few other regional artists such as Chris Wall and Chris

²⁰⁷ Skanse, “A Man Apart.”

LeDoux. These four represented a new generation of fans of local, live, original Texas Country music who would redirect Keen from his trajectory as a folk icon into the leader of a regional musical scene.²⁰⁸

In Dallas, Harris and Robert Henry were among the original audience for Jack Ingram's first live performances at Adair's saloon in Deep Ellum. By 1992, the pair and their friends were regularly attending the Three Teardrops Tavern nearby to see Keen, Wall, Ingram, Larry Joe Taylor, Ray Wylie Hubbard, and others on the honky-tonk circuit.²⁰⁹ Meanwhile, in Lubbock, David Henry and Zintgraff had discovered their fraternity brother, Cory Morrow, had similar musical tastes and could play guitar and sing. David came across Pat Green picking at a party and introduced him to Morrow. Green had been converted from "whatever was on the radio" to Texas music when given a cassette of *No Kinda Dancer* by high school friend (and Harris's future wife) Elizabeth Harris née Mosley.²¹⁰ Soon Green and Morrow were the featured entertainment at regular Wednesday night parties in Henry's apartment. The brothers travelled back and forth between Lubbock and Dallas and brought their friends with them. These forays exposed Green and Morrow to Keen, Ingram, Wall and others, inspiring their own musical careers. This sort of cross-pollination among college students in the early 1990s marked the beginning of the Texas Country scene and Keen would become its biggest star.²¹¹

²⁰⁸ David Henry, Interview.; Robert Henry, Interview.; Stephen Harris, interview by author, Fredericksburg, TX, November 29, 1016.; Brian Zintgraff, Interview.

²⁰⁹ Harris, Interview.

²¹⁰ Green, Interview.

²¹¹ David Henry, Interview.; Robert Henry, Interview.; Harris, Interview.

Around the state, others, born in the 1970s, were discovering Keen. Jason Whittemore first heard Keen in 1993 at Luckenbach on a road trip for a friend's 17th birthday. Whittemore's parents listened to progressive and outlaw country, and Keen struck a chord with the Austin high schooler. "I really like acoustic guitar. It's very soothing. Very therapeutic. I also felt like these guys were telling a story. And their words to me had more meaning than the Top 40 stuff." Whittemore's experience in Luckenbach highlights the folkier stage of Keen's career. He recalled, "An awesome setting. Just a small crowd. Probably two or three deep in front of the stage and then people sitting down listening to him. People outside the dance hall listening to him and people dancing in the back. After that I was hooked."²¹²

Zac Whitley, who grew up in Alice, Texas, not far from the old bull's home in Agua Dulce, first heard Keen while working on a ranch in high school with some Aggie students. Whitley found Keen's lyrics more in line with his own personal experiences, particularly Keen's songs that reference South Texas, such as "The Front Porch Song," and the Gulf Coast, such as "Corpus Christi Bay." "When I started listening to Robert Earl Keen it was mine. I brought it back from the ranch and started playing it for people." Soon Whitley was calling the Executive Surf Club in Corpus Christi to find out when Keen was playing. Whitley embraced Keen because, as he saw it, "at the time country music was kind of going to shit."²¹³

²¹² Whittemore, interview by author, Austin, November 30, 2016.

²¹³ Zach Whitley, interview by author, Austin, October 27, 2016.

In *Country Music, U.S.A.*, Bill Malone and Jocelyn Neal point to 1992 as a turning point in mainstream country due to the massive crossover success of Billy Ray Cyrus's "Achy-Breaky Heart" and the line-dance craze it inspired. As the decade progressed, major labels embraced a blend of "pop and country elements," that led to unprecedented profits from the genre. Artists were "recorded with state of the art precision. Enhanced by digital recording techniques that permit the production of "perfect" recorded performances that can scarcely be re-created in live settings." As the first wave of future Texas Country music fans entered college and began discerning their own, more personalized music preferences country radio offered a sound with a "suburban mall lack of distinctiveness," that was not, "country in any meaningful way." Radio playlists were limited to a few pop-infused singles determined by "unnamed consultants." Even worse for fans seeking to "perform the Texan," homogeneity had gripped the industry such that, "a listener travelling anywhere in America encountered the same body of recordings." This poppy, commercialized style of country was enormously successful among adult, suburban fans, but failed to connect with their college-aged children.²¹⁴

Brendon Anthony explained that this phenomenon is a frequent topic of conversation among Texas Country artists and fans. He opined:

I don't believe that, in the 90's when we were collectively coming of age as performers, country music spoke to our stage in life as it is striving to do today. The country music of the 90's was primarily geared towards adults dealing with fairly adult situations. Divorce, relationship difficulties compounded by alcoholism, shared custody, problems with the bank, etc.... Randy Travis singing

²¹⁴ Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 239-40.

about his love being ‘Deeper Than the Holler’ was fun to sing along to but did absolutely nothing emotional for me as a listener. Doug Supernaw singing about “I don’t Call Him Daddy” again was ‘hummable’ but I had zero experience here to draw from that would give this song staying power with me, at least not as a young adult. The list goes on and on here. The songs about being from rural areas were somewhat more relatable but had more to do with adults getting back to their roots rather than the experience of actually trying to enjoy oneself in a small town that had little to offer besides church youth group or FFA conventions.

Keen and other Texas Country artists “turned the needle” for Anthony because they sang about “experiences that were fresh on my mind,” or recalled an earlier Texas. “Ingram singing about a ‘young man driving down a dusty road, like he’s got somewhere to go’ and REK singing about a front porch IN THE VERY TOWN I CALLED HOME just completely hooked me and I wanted in on it.....badly.” Anthony invoked the power of seeing his first Texas Country concert. “I understood the message I was hearing from the stage; I was surrounded by people my age who were hearing the same message; and thought ‘hey, I could be on THAT stage in front of these people’” Soon after, the College Station native and Aggie undergraduate made the transition from fan to performer.²¹⁵

In A&M, Keen, an Aggie alumnus, was rapidly becoming a phenomenon. Keen remarked in 1993, “I’ve become the hero of the dysfunctional Aggie.”²¹⁶ Future Texas Country artist Dub Miller recalled his first time seeing Keen at the Stafford Opera House in Bryan, Texas, with Ingram opening, that same year. “It was brand new and exciting. If you’re a college kid in College Station, Robert Earl Keen is hard to beat.” Miller explained Keen, unlike revered, better known artists such as Nelson and Walker, “was

²¹⁵ Brendon Anthony, e-mail to author, March 29, 2016.

²¹⁶ Michael Corcoran, “Keen Desire – A Great Texas Singer-Songwriter is Losing His Undiscovered Status,” *Dallas Morning News*, May 13, 1993.

ours.” Keen’s relative anonymity gave young fans a sense of discovery and membership in an exclusive group who recognized the artist’s gifts. Upon seeing Keen headline the Spring Break show on South Padre Island, Miller remembered, “being really excited about it at the time because this is my music. I felt a part of it.” Furthermore, Miller recognized the regional nature of the phenomenon. “That’s where you saw all the other kids from Tech and UT and all over the place. College campuses everywhere were getting in on this about the same time.” Keen’s perceived sincerity moved Miller, who soon began striving to make his own Texas Country music.²¹⁷ Miller is offering a concrete example of ethnomusicologist Manuel Peña’s belief that, “Music in [live] contexts acquires an indexical status as an emblem of the group’s most basic sense of communal identity and purpose.”²¹⁸

Despite quickly regretting recording another artist’s signature song, Ingram’s cover of “The Road” also helped bring in a younger crowd.²¹⁹ Ingram’s popularity was growing around the “Southwest Conference Circuit,” a ring of college towns named for their college sports affiliation. Observant fans, drawn to Ingram’s high energy, college oriented shows, noticed Keen’s writing credit on “The Road” and, in this way, discovered the father of Texas Country.²²⁰ Through these, and countless other episodes, Keen

²¹⁷ Dub Miller, interview by author, Mason, TX, October 26, 2016.

²¹⁸ Manuel H. Peña, *Música Tejana: The Cultural Economy of Artistic Transformation* (College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press, 1999), 5

²¹⁹ Jeremy Elliott, interview by author, August 26, 2016.

²²⁰ Kilian, Interview.; Incidentally, this is how I first became aware of Robert Earl Keen as well.

inadvertently gained what his peers had neither pursued nor achieved, a devoted, rowdy following among the children of the progressive country generation.

Robert Earl Keen and Organic Music

In his study, *Música Tejana: The Cultural Economy of Artistic Transformation*, Peña divides music into “Organic, culturally meaningful performance based on use-value; and superorganic commodity production drive by exchange-value.” For Peña, only live performance of music that evolved from the culture of the community and that was not performed for profit is considered organic. This creates use value because the music itself conveys meaning and cultural information to the community. Once an artist records, or writes down, music and replays it for profit, it loses this organic use value and instead becomes superorganic, gaining exchange value, meaning the music has become commodified and the goal is financial profit.²²¹

Texas musician, historian, and the Director of the Center for Texas Music History, Gary Hartman employs Manuel Peña’s formulation of organic and superorganic cultural production in his *History of Texas Music*. Hartman observes that while Peña’s distinction has merit, in practice virtually all music has both organic and superorganic qualities. Hartman cites troubadours, who served a cultural purpose in conveying news and meaningful stories, but also sought recompense, even if only in the form of food and lodging. Hartman also notes how music that is clearly superorganic in its conception can come to carry significant meaning to a community, such as Stephen Foster’s 19th century

²²¹ Peña, *Música Tejana: The Cultural Economy of Artistic*, 3-5; Peña attributes his formulation of organic and superorganic to Don Ben Amos who was applying to music Marxist principals first proposed by Alfred Kroeber.

compositions which have come to be seen as folk music or Vietnam and Civil Rights era protest songs that continue to have profound political meaning to many. In light of these arguments, it is best to think of organic and superorganic less as a dichotomy, which requires theorists to force each piece of music into one category or another, but instead as a spectrum. By accepting the basic idea of organic and superorganic music, yet arguing no music is entirely one or the other, Hartman implies music can be more or less organic or superorganic.²²²

This perception of music's relative organic nature is a primary component of what fans and critics mean when they discuss music's "authenticity" or "real"-ness. Texas Country fans rejected Nashville, with its perfect studio production and consultant driven playlists, as excessively superorganic, or "fake." In Keen, they found a performer they perceived as organic, or "real." There were clearly superorganic characteristics of Keen's music and performance. He was, after all, on a label, fans had to pay a cover or buy tickets to his shows, and his music was for sale. In the end, for Texas Country authenticants, the organic elements overshadowed these factors. His label was the tiny, independent, folk oriented Sugar Hill Records. His failure to become a Nashville star, and his clear lack of a "radio voice" fed the notion that he was a homegrown, Texas-specific phenomenon. His performance style, with his long stories inserted into songs and acoustic instrumentation, rejected Nashville conventions. His subject matter was intensely geographically specific, suggesting he was writing and performing for a discrete regional community. All these elements created the sense that Keen was an organic

²²² Gary Hartman, *The History of Texas Music* (College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press, 2008), 13-4.

musical entity and gave him currency with a young generation of fans looking to “perform the Texan,” by eschewing overtly superorganic, nationally homogenized music in favor of a homegrown variety of country they could call their own.

“A Huge Body County”: *A Bigger Piece of Sky* (1993)

As Keen’s popularity rose, he returned to Nashville to record his fourth album, *A Bigger Piece of Sky* (1993). The album, replete with cowboy themes and western imagery, features a stronger sense of place than Keen’s earlier work. Despite his increasing crowds, Keen continued to see his songs as primarily for sale to record labels. In his review in the *Dallas Morning News*, Michael Corcoran suggested Keen created the album from songs he could not sell to other artists. Thematically, the album is darker, more violent, and more western than Keen’s other works. Upset when Nashville’s Bluebird Café billed him as a “comedian-singer-songwriter,” Keen avoided including his trademark humorous songs.²²³ Many of the lyrics read like westerns with the expected level of violence. Keen recollected, “I’ve got a huge body count in *A Bigger Piece of Sky*. I think 30 or 40 people die on that one.”²²⁴ In a positive review for the *Statesman*, Don McLeese labeled the album, “deranged,” with “enough gunfire and assorted mayhem to fill a Peckinpah splatter flick.” “Jesse with the Long Hair,” a miniature movie in the vein of “The Road,” and the Ely favorite “Whenever Kindness Fails” exemplifies the album’s

²²³ Corcoran, “Keen Desire.”

²²⁴ Fink, “Legend: Robert Earl Keen.”

violent theme. Interestingly, in the wake of his deadliest album, Keen opined only rap could compete with country for “interesting lyrics” at the time.²²⁵

Another increasing theme in Keen’s music is a sense of weariness and regret induced by a hell-raising lifestyle, a standard honky-tonk theme that would reappear often in Texas Country music. Building on *The Live Album’s* “I’ll Go on Downtown,” *West Textures* adds “So I Can Take My Rest” and “Paint the Town Beige” to this litany. Songs such as these became staples of Texas Country, particularly for Green and Morrow. “Dancehall Dreamer,” “One for the Road,” and “Adios Days” serve as examples of Green’s forays into the genre. Morrow, who developed a reputation for being both difficult and a hell-raiser alternately celebrates the “party never ends” lifestyle and pledges to change his ways in songs such as “The Way Things Used to Be,” “The Man That I Have Been,” “Nashville Blues,” and “The Songwriter’s Lament (A Poem).” Morrow went so far as to cover Keen’s “I’ll Go on Downtown” on his *Full Exposure Live* (2001).²²⁶

The Terry Allen-penned “Amarillo Highway” and Keen’s own “Corpus Christi Bay” became fan favorites due, in part, to their geographic specificity, another element Texas Country songwriters embraced. This sort of regionalism had been a cornerstone for the progressive and outlaw eras, exemplified by such Texas classics as B.W. Stevenson’s “Texas Morning” (1972), Gary P. Nunn’s “London Homesick Blues” (1973), Guy

²²⁵ Don McLeese, “Prodigal Son Returns Home – Keen Reconnects with Texas Audiences After an Unsuccessful Try at Nashville,” *Austin American-Statesman*, March 4, 1993.

²²⁶ Brandon Allen, phone interview by author, Lufkin, TX, May 13, 2017.

Clark's "Texas Cooking" (1976), and Waylon Jennings' massive crossover hit, "Luckenbach (Back to the Basics of Love)" (1977). While Ingram mostly avoided overt references to the Lone Star State, Green, Morrow, and those who they inspired reveled in Texana with songs such as Green's "I Like Texas" (1995) and "Songs About Texas" (1997) and Morrow's "Texas Time Travellin'" (1996) and "Texas Bound Train" (1996). Following in this celebrated tradition would pack Texas Country artists' shows while earning them critical scorn.²²⁷ The legions of fans who embraced Texas Country either ignored the critics or wore their contempt as a badge of honor. The regional focus and western themes were key aspects of "performing the Texan," even among fans and artists who frequently rejected such outward symbols of Texanness such as cowboy hats and western style clothing.

A Bigger Piece of Sky contains one track that did not start a trend in Texas Country. McLeese described "Blow You Away" as "a chipper little singalong about how the person driving in the car next to you would just as soon pump your body full of lead."²²⁸ Politics rarely, if ever, surface overtly in Keen's work or Texas Country generally, but "Blow You Away" is hard to see as anything but a warning, if not a critique, of the mindset that attends gun culture. The song's character stumbles through a dreary, working class existence convinced that literally everyone he meets would gun him down if they could. This dark worldview makes the lump of the shotgun under his mattress a small price to pay for protection. Keen even indicts the man's religious views.

²²⁷ Jim Caligiuri, "Pat Green's Controversial Brand of 'Texas Music,'" *Austin Chronicle*, October 19, 2001.

²²⁸ McLeese, "Prodigal Son Returns."

Only one of the lyric's ten verses does not end with the refrain, "just as soon blow you away," instead explaining, "when you're in with the Lord there's just one reward/and they'd just as soon make it come true." "Blow You Away" stands as a curiosity in Keen's, and Texas Country's, catalog for its thinly veiled politics.²²⁹

Dual Identity: 1993-1995

A Bigger Piece of Sky only added to Keen's increasingly popular live shows.

Sugar Hill noted a sharp increase in interests both in Texas and nationally as well. In Dallas, the 2,400 seat Majestic Theatre booked Keen.²³⁰ In neighboring Fort Worth, Keen had risen from "a couple dozen" at the HOP to consistently leaving ticketless fans shedding tears outside sold out shows at the 500-seat Scott Theater.²³¹ Keen was so popular in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, one promoter even tried to put him on between Van Zandt and Clark until Clark became enraged and declared the two older stars would perform together.²³² Keen also continued to gain fans outside the state as well. Sugar Hill's marketing director Beverly Paul credited Keen's live shows with creating markets wherever he played citing Atlanta, eastern Tennessee, California's Bay Area, and Tampa-St. Petersburg as growth areas for the Texan.²³³

²²⁹ Robert Earl Keen, "Blow You Away," *A Bigger Piece of Sky*, Sugar Hill, 1993, CD.

²³⁰ Corcoran, "Keen Desire."

²³¹ Shirley Jenkins, "Keen-Do Guy: Robert Earl Keen and Fort Worth Go Together Like Peas and Carrots," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, August 14, 1994.

²³² Saviano, "Without Getting Killed Or Caught," 227.

²³³ Jenkins, "Keen-Do Guy."

In the summer of 1994, Keen replaced Jimmie Dale Gilmore off-Broadway in the musical *Chippy*, alongside a cast filled with Keen's songwriting peers and heroes. Written and performed by Jo Harvey and Terry Allen, Jo Carol Peirce, Butch Hancock, Wayne "The Train" Hancock, and Joe Ely, the piece is a musical set in the Depression.²³⁴ That fall, Robert Earl and Kathleen's first child, Clara, was born.²³⁵ As Keen's real family grew, his musical family expanded as well.

In these years, a dedicated subculture of college-aged fans began following Keen around the state, and occasionally even beyond. These fans formed the core of the Texas Country scene and include future performers Morrow, Green, and Stephen Harris, who would form the duo Harris & Ryden. Scenes are often associated with a particular city, especially in their formative stages. In Texas, music cities associated with specific scenes include San Antonio's 1960s West Side Sound, the Houston folk scene of the 1960s, and the blues of pre-war Dallas's Deep Ellum. In the 1970s, Austin became so closely associated with progressive country the city has taken on the role of the epicenter of Texas music ever since, at least in public perception.²³⁶

In reality, Texas Country was a trans-local scene. This is different from a set of essentially discrete scenes in various cities in a region because scenes are constituted of specific individuals interacting around the live performance of music. The willingness and ability of so many of its participants to travel around the state, and beyond, created a

²³⁴ Jinkins, "Keen-Do Guy."

²³⁵ Don McLeese, "Keen Fine Tunes for Paramount Show," *Austin American-Statesman*, October 4, 1994.

²³⁶ Zintgraff, interview.

community that transcended a single city and established Texas Country's trans-local nature. Zintgraff recalled his group of friends, often including Green, would meet up at venues all over the state to see their favorite artists such as progressive country legends Jerry Jeff Walker and Gary P. Nunn as well as artists they felt like they had discovered, such as Keen and Chris Wall, a singer-songwriter who had impressed Walker so thoroughly in the Million Dollar Cowboy Bar in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, he was urged to move to Austin. Shortly after Wall's migration, Walker recorded *Live at Gruene Hall* (1989), an album featuring three Wall covers, which also served as a key recording, along with Wall's own work, in the formation of Texas Country. Zintgraff was quick to note, among his social group, these other artists, "weren't revered the way Robert Earl was."

This vanguard of the Texas Country scene regularly travelled to venues such as the Cactus Café in Austin, Sons of Hermann Hall and Poor David's Pub in Dallas, Floore's Country Store in Helotes, Stubb's Bar-B-Q in Lubbock, Executive Surf Club in Corpus Christi, and Gruene Hall. Two of Zintgraff's friends, Paige Blanton and Jake West, even followed him into New Mexico and Colorado on a whim after finals one semester. Zintgraff even admitted his cohort were the victims of numerous "shushings" from Keen's older, folkier crowd. This cross-pollination created a group of fans, performers and those working in the scene as managers, booking agents, merchandise people, and radio personalities that made the scene truly trans-local.²³⁷

As far back as the El Patio show, part of his "World Tour of San Antonio," Keen had begun to realize his voice and acoustic guitar alone was not going to be enough for

²³⁷ Zintgraff, interview.

his growing crowds. Keen was living two musical lives, split between his quiet sedate singer-songwriter shows and his increasingly raucous, beer-soaked outings. “There was not an infrastructure for what I was doing. Because I was playing the Cactus Cafe one time, and doing kind of a little folk thing, and then the next weekend I would be at Floore’s Country Store, and it’d be a total honky-tonk experience.” Keen recognized he was going to have to change his live show explaining, “‘All of a sudden we’re playing Gruene Hall, 600 people,’ he says. ‘I was trying to do that with me and my friend Duckworth, and nobody could hear us. Nobody would listen while I was trying to tell a story so I said, ‘Man, we need more stuff.’”²³⁸ Realizing he could not hold his crowds of 2,000 or more of mainly younger fans without a bigger sound, Keen set about building the Robert Earl Keen Band.²³⁹ In its first stable incarnation, the lineup consisted of Keen’s childhood friend Bryan Duckworth on fiddle, Rich Brotherton switching out guitars and mandolins, Mark Patterson on drums, and bassist Dave Heath.²⁴⁰

Radio also played a key part in Keen’s expansion. By 1994, he was regularly drawing at least 300 fans outside the state and close to 3000 at home in Texas. Which crowd showed up largely depended on what type of radio station was playing Keen. If a folk station spun his tunes, an older, calmer crowd would appear, but if an outlaw country station picked up Keen, the rowdy crowd materialized.²⁴¹ This dual identity came to

²³⁸ Gray, “One More Image.”

²³⁹ Skanse, “A Man Apart.”

²⁴⁰ Jenkins, “Keen-Do Guy.”

²⁴¹ Comanche Trace, “At Home in Texas.”

define Keen's career and, ultimately, force him to make choices about what type of artist he wanted to be.

“Empty, Open Spaces”: *Gringo Honeymoon* (1994)

When Keen returned to Nashville to record *Gringo Honeymoon* (1994), his band travelled with him and played on the album, with the exception of bassist Heath. Producer Gary Velletri enlisted E-Street Band co-founder Garry Tallent to play Heath's parts along with help from other Nashville session musicians. The largely autobiographical album, released August 10, 1994, propelled Keen to the forefront of two burgeoning movements, the attempt to form an Americana radio format rooted in the folk crowd and the increasingly popular, youth oriented Texas Country scene.²⁴² *Gringo Honeymoon* was critically acclaimed, winning Keen Texas Album of the Year, along with three other awards, and induction into the Hall of Fame at the Kerrville Folk Festival Awards.²⁴³

Keen's follow up to *A Bigger Piece of Sky* was far less violent with only a cover, Steve Earle's "Tom Ames' Prayer," featuring gunplay. Most of the rest of the album focuses on stories from Keen's relationship, including the title track, which Kathleen described as "a complete piece of journalism, because it all happened exactly that way."²⁴⁴ The story of the Keens' trip across the Rio Grande also name checks Marty

²⁴² Bill Whitbeck, interview by author, Buda, TX, March 12, 2016.

²⁴³ John T. Davis, "Kerrville Awards Are Lovefest for Keen," *Austin American-Statesman*, September 22, 1994.

²⁴⁴ Skanse, "A Man Apart."

Robbins, perhaps the most important composer and popularizer of the sort of western gunfighter ballads in which Keen frequently traffics. Overall, the album is more personal and faster paced, and features more instruments than earlier albums, giving it a more energetic feel in line with Keen's attempts to entertain larger crowds.

This Texas-centric autobiographical style was both influential and impactful to the fans and artists of the Texas Country scene. Autobiographical songs about growing up in Texas are perhaps the single most common type of song in the early Texas Country catalog. Ingram's genre-defining anthem "Beat Up Ford" is one such example. Green specialized in this sort of lyric with "Here We Go," "Dancehall Dreamer," "Southbound 35," and "Down to the River" all on his 1995 debut, and 1997's *George's Bar's* title track and "Just Fine," and 2001's *Carry On's* title track and "Galleywinter" all being Texas rooted autobiographies. These sorts of songs also accounted for younger fans' enthusiasm for Keen and the genre generally. In each of my interviews, I asked what drew the interviewee to the genre, and uniformly, whether artist or fan, the respondents pointed to a personal connection with the stories that echoed the places and experiences of their own lives. Will Dupuy, stand up bassist and co-founder of the South Austin Jug Band, felt Keen was "singing about where I'm from. I completely identify with this guy."²⁴⁵ Stephen Harris, who would form Harris & Ryden, immediately knew, "this is my kind of music."²⁴⁶ Whitley was first drawn to Keen because "he sang about Corpus and Agua Dulce." Meeting Keen after a show one night, he learned he knew the owners of the rig

²⁴⁵ Dupuy, interview.

²⁴⁶ Harris, interview.

Keen worked on during those 1970s college summers.²⁴⁷ Dub Miller connected as well, describing it as “sincere music performed by people you can relate to,” and felt that “makes you feel a part of it.”²⁴⁸ In Keen, Whittmore found familiar stories and lyrics that “had more meaning than the Top 40 stuff.”²⁴⁹

Zintgraff echoed similar sentiments. “It was real. There was a story to be told in each one of the songs, and it just sounded right. The old Robert Earl stuff with the upright bass, that didn’t exist anywhere. [Upright bass player] Dave Heath and that sound really just clicked.” The relevance Keen’s songs and stories bore to his young fans’ lives also made an impact. “His songs were really close to the shit that we were doing or had done, so it was very relatable. Not necessarily what we were doing but what we yearned to do. It was local enough that it was geographically relevant as well.”²⁵⁰ When Keen finally signed with a major label, Arista, in 1997, Cameron Randle, Arista/Texas vice president, said, “One of the strengths of his music is that it’s specific to Texas.”²⁵¹

The album reflected Keen’s return to his dark comic roots with perhaps his most well-known hit outside Texas, “Merry Christmas from the Family.” The *Statesman* praised the future cult classic as “the mordant, Texas-Gothic Merry Christmas from the

²⁴⁷ Whitley, interview.

²⁴⁸ Miller, interview.

²⁴⁹ Whittmore, interview.

²⁵⁰ Zintgraff, interview.

²⁵¹ Reid, “Cult of Keen.”

Family, darkly comic, but it is always rendered vividly.”²⁵² Keen’s Christmas carol even garnered national notice with *Newsweek* magazine praising the “picture-perfect portrait of a dysfunctional holiday.” Even more interesting, the national publication noted the distinction between Texas artists such as Keen and their Nashville cousins, introducing Keen by explaining to unfamiliar readers, “there’s a certain kind of country sensibility you just can’t get in Nashville. It’s about empty, open spaces instead of city lights, broken-in boots instead of sequins, dirt roads instead of walks of fame.” Observations like these make it clear Texas was building its own, distinct country genre, one that was not a smaller version of Nashville but something different entirely.²⁵³

While Keen dialed down the anthemic Texas shout outs of *A Bigger Piece of Sky*, the autobiographical nature of the album only made it more of a touchstone for the college crowd who recognized the people and places from Keen’s life. It was also the first new album released for many of Keen’s new young fans generating a sense of ownership as they shared it in college dorms and apartments across the state.²⁵⁴ “Merry Christmas from the Family” also had the advantage of inducing laughter among almost any audience from its opening verse, making it ideal for holiday radio play for the Christmas of 1994 and introducing friends to him. Keen had been steadily building two

²⁵² John T. Davis, “Keen Focus - Texas singer fills out his stories with the inspiration of birth, lovers' fatal quarrels and Monty Python,” *Austin American-Statesman*, September 22, 1994.

²⁵³ Karen Schoemer, “Expect the Unexpected - Music: On the road with Sheryl Crow, surprise superstar. Still more surprises: Keith Richards and Satchmo, C&W sidemen. Gershwin that’s not boring. Two new faces. And...Tom Jones?,” *Newsweek*, October 24, 1994, accessed March 15, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/expect-unexpected-189464>.

²⁵⁴ Miller, interview.

different followings since fleeing Nashville seven years earlier, believing his career over; *Gringo Honeymoon* would dramatically accelerate this growth among his rowdier crowd and make him Texas Country's first superstar.²⁵⁵

The Rowdy Crowd: 1994-1997

In April 1995, Bill Whitbeck recorded a letter on a tape recorder to a friend in California while driving home from a gig as the bass player in a honky-tonk cover band. He informed his friend he was done with music as profession. Whitbeck had picked up the bass in high school in 1972. He played trombone in the La Porte High School band on the Texas coast, so he already knew the bass clef. Soon he was gigging with cover bands playing songs by the Eagles, Gram Parsons, Jerry Jeff Walker, and other popular tunes. In 1976, he moved to San Marcos to play in the popular country cover group Joe Bob's Bar and Grill Band. For the next two decades, Whitbeck supported himself and his family being ignored by bar patrons, grinding out whatever was on the radio that week until deciding to give it up that night driving home. "I just can't do it anymore. I can't just play the latest Neal McCoy song or some sort of horrible radio shit," he complained into the recorder.²⁵⁶

Arriving home, Whitbeck found a note left by his wife telling him Bryan Duckworth had called. Whitbeck knew Duckworth from gigging and remembered the fiddler telling him a few months earlier about playing original music with an old friend Whitbeck did not know. Frustrated with cover bands, Whitbeck decided that night

²⁵⁵ Whitbeck, interview.

²⁵⁶ Whitbeck, interview.

whatever Duckworth was offering, he would take. Whitbeck called Keen in the morning and arranged to try out. Keen told Whitbeck he was the twenty-third bass player to audition since Dave Heath had decided to leave the band, presumably unhappy with Keen's rowdy crowds. Whitbeck stopped in to Sundance Records in San Marcos and bought *Gringo Honeymoon* to learn the audition material. Seeing Tallent had played bass on the sessions buoyed his confidence. Whitbeck, a Springsteen fan, had seen the E-Street Band on its first trips to Texas; he was confident he could emulate Tallent's style.²⁵⁷

Meeting Keen on a Monday, Whitbeck only played two songs and spent most of the time chatting. As Duckworth explained, the difficulty in finding a band member was not musical ability. "Some of those guys could play but you didn't know if you wanted to sit in a van with them for twenty hours." Keen offered Whitbeck the job and informed him the first gig would be that Friday in College Station. Whitbeck learned forty-five songs in five days, including backing vocals before the College Station show, but not the way he had in cover bands. "'You want me to learn these songs note for note?' which is sort of the Nashville approach. And he goes, 'No, you play good. Play whatever you want.'" Whitbeck treasures the freedom Keen gives his band, "We're very tight but there's a looseness in it. That's where the energy comes from." Keen's trust in his band gave the band a "punk feel" and created much of the excitement of his live shows.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁷ Whitbeck, interview.

²⁵⁸ Whitbeck, interview.

The new band member was not prepared for what was to come. Whitbeck had run into Duckworth a couple of years before, and the fiddle player described Keen's gigs: "We play at Gruene Hall all the time. It's really fun because people sit on the floor on blankets and Robert tells stories." Expecting a "very folky thing, I walked onto the stage in College Station and there's 800 eighteen-year-old guys screaming their lungs out, and I loved it."²⁵⁹ The youth of Keen's crowds was shocking. Keen recalled playing Rockefeller's in Houston and realizing, "half the crowd was in high school." Keen, in his mid-thirties, was stunned. "They were like, 'Oh man, we love 'Copenhagen,' we love 'Five Pound Bass,' and they knew all the words to 'Road Goes on Forever.'" When they presented yearbooks with "Road Goes on Forever" as their senior songs, Keen was perplexed. "I couldn't tell you how that happened. Because they weren't listening to the public radio folk hours, I can guarantee you."²⁶⁰ Keen's peers shared his surprise. "Lyle came to about three shows last year [1997] and just freaked out," reminisced Keen, "Those people are really young! I mean, his [Lovett's] audience is like our age, and a lot of them are sophisticated and have a lot of money and love music and all that stuff, but it's not the gutbucket of America coming to his shows. Shoot, I don't think anybody gets drunk at one of his shows."²⁶¹

As one journalist marveled, "At Keen shows, it seems, everyone gets drunk."

Keen explained:

²⁵⁹ Whitbeck, interview.

²⁶⁰ Skanse, "A Man Apart."

²⁶¹ McLeese, "Straight Outta Bandera."

We sell more beer at our shows than anybody else does anywhere, Oh, man, it's just nuts. We go to places and they sell out of beer. It's just like, let's go get drunk and watch Robert Earl Keen. What we're bringing to the party is this party atmosphere, and there are quite a few references to being drunk and disorderly in my songs, so I guess that's where they get that. Probably the number-one remark I get in fan mail or from people talking to me after shows is, "My buddies and I like to get really drunk and sit around and play your songs." It's always, 'really drunk.' Whatever. I'm glad.²⁶²

Drummer Mark Patterson had to explain to Keen he had become the favorite of the "rowdy crowd," a euphemism for fraternity guys. Keen confessed, "I was just totally oblivious to the fact that all these young guys with the caps and stuff were in fraternities. I wasn't in a fraternity and I don't know what it's about. Man, I tell you, if they like the music, then more power to 'em. In general, they're always really nice and they're loud and I want people to have a good time."²⁶³ The fraternity element was key to Keen's success and would be crucial to the development of Texas Country generally. Fraternities provided a ready-made infrastructure for spreading music and turning out fans to gigs. Ingram, Green, and Morrow all were members of fraternities, and the social networks they formed in these organizations helped them fill their early gigs.²⁶⁴

The rowdy crowd helped Keen sell tickets and CDs, but not everyone was happy to see them at shows. Keen lamented, "I've had friends tell me, 'Man, I'm sorry, I just can't come to your shows anymore.' It's not just Aggies; it's a fraternity thing. Sometimes the youth and testosterone just overwhelm them. I wind up feeling like a

²⁶² McLeese, "Straight Outta Bandera."

²⁶³ Gray, "One More Image."

²⁶⁴ Anthony, e-mail to author, June 1, 2015.

second-grade teacher.”²⁶⁵ According to Whitbeck, even the band had mixed feelings about the swelling crowds. Demoralized from decades of being ignored as a member of a series of cover bands, the enthusiasm thrilled Whitbeck. “It would get old, people throwing shit at you but the excitement of the shows was fantastic to me. Sold out shows with people screaming...I was never like, I wish they were older and would sit there and not talk.” Other band members did wish they would sit there and not talk, although Whitbeck declined to say whom. He did speculate this is what drove Heath to leave Keen, opening up the spot Whitbeck filled.²⁶⁶

Keen’s rabid disciples became renowned for singing along to every song, not just the hits. Maines marveled, “I’ll never forget the first gig I did with Robert Earl. I was just blown away at how people were singing every lyric.”²⁶⁷ Some of Keen’s more genteel fans resented this enthusiasm. One commented, “Pretty good show – except for those sonsabitches behind me yelling in three-part harmony.”²⁶⁸ Whitbeck observed, “I still talk to people my age and they say, ‘I’d come see you play but I don’t want some 18 year old throwing up on me.’”²⁶⁹ “In response to his crowds being too loud, Keen noted, “If they want to sing along, fine. They’re not memorizing my songs by reading liner notes. What that tells me is they’re listening to those records over and over and over.”²⁷⁰ In

²⁶⁵ Reid, “Cult of Keen.”

²⁶⁶ Whitbeck, interview.

²⁶⁷ Skanse, “A Man Apart.”

²⁶⁸ Reid, “Cult of Keen.”

²⁶⁹ Whitbeck, interview.

²⁷⁰ Reid, “Cult of Keen.”

1998, Keen explained he was happy to have the large crowds because it meant he could keep playing music and avoid having to get another job.²⁷¹

What did frustrate Keen was the assumption that his success in the Lone Star State meant he did not travel outside Texas. He recalled, “I have people all the time come up to me and say, ‘Do you ever play outside of Texas?’ And I think, ‘I’ve been playing outside of Texas since 1981.’” Since his earliest solo shows, Keen had continued to play across the United States and occasionally in Europe. By the late 1990s, the southeastern U.S. had become another strong region for Keen. Whitbeck recalled what became a familiar pattern. “[P]lay once to a decent crowd – second time it was packed bar owners asking what Shiner Beer was, third time they would sell cases and cases of Shiner Beer.” Whitbeck attributes Keen’s ability to cultivate new markets to the artist’s work ethic, explaining in a new city, “Robert played harder and better and longer than at the other shows. And I was used to people that would have walked out there and said, ‘This sucks, we’ll play a short set’ and I was like this guy is so serious about doing it right.”²⁷² On the strength of his live shows and limited support from local radio, by the release of *Gringo Honeymoon* in 1995, Keen was selling 400 to 500 CDs a week in the southeastern United States.²⁷³

²⁷¹ McLeese, “Straight Outta Bandera.”

²⁷² Whitbeck, interview.

²⁷³ John Herndon, “Rednecks Have Keen Insight,” *Austin American-Statesman*, October 26, 1995.

“It Was Our ¡Viva Terlingua!”: No. 2 Live Dinner (1996)

Robust music scenes face a paradox. Music scenes are, by definition, largely based on the organic participation in a live, communal experience. Scenes are made of people interacting, and the primary venue for this interaction is at a musical performance. Yet, expansion, revenue and preservation of scenes depend on recorded music that can be sold or played on the radio to gain new converts. Consequently, selling the scene, as opposed to selling the music, often depends on the ability of a recording to convey a sense of live participation in the community. As Peña explains, “It is only in specific social settings, when activated in communicative process through performance, that music attains status as part of a culture.”²⁷⁴ The primary tool employed by artists to accomplish this goal is the recording of a live concert. A successful live record can convey the feeling of participating in a scene to fans that may have never seen the performer in person. Fans might be surprised to learn many “live” recordings contain very little of the performance on the stage they claim to represent but rather feature extensive overdubs (individual parts played over the main recording) or entire performances played in a studio after the fact.²⁷⁵ Often, even the crowd noise is generic cheering, laid down under the tracks and raised and lowered at appropriate times. The advantage to this approach is it allows producers to capture flawless performances in sound controlled environments. The disadvantage are that the recordings can lack energy and fail to convey the experience of the artist’s live show. In the Texas Country scene,

²⁷⁴ Manuel

²⁷⁵ Travis Stimeling, “¡Viva Terlingua!: Jerry Jeff Walker, Live Recordings, and the Authenticity of Progressive Country Music,” *The Journal of Texas Music History* 8, no. 1, 2008, 20-32.

the *Live at Billy Bob's* series became notorious among musicians for employing this method.²⁷⁶

In the progressive scene, Jerry Jeff Walker had sought to capture the experience of his live performances on record with remarkable success. According to Travis Stimeling, after signing a record deal in the wake of the success of the Walker penned “Mr. Bojangles,” the itinerant New Yorker, “refused to set foot in a [major label] studio.” Walker found the studio to be “a sterile place,” which offered “an alienating experience.” Walker decided, “The shared belief that progressive country remained independent from the mediating forces of the national music industry” made Austin and its burgeoning scene an ideal escape. In 1972, Walker found the primitive Odyssey Studios on West 6th Street, plugged instruments directly into a recorder on a stool, and invited anyone who came by to pick. For the final product, Walker chose not to clean up mistakes, a practice unthinkable in major label studios, and essentially released a “live,” if not public, performance.²⁷⁷ Walker referred to his style of recording as, “ragged but right.”²⁷⁸ Walker’s colleague Willie Nelson agreed. Nelson explained the distinction between Nashville and Austin country music in Reid’s *Improbable Rise of Redneck Rock*. “The

²⁷⁶ Brendon Anthony, e-mail to author, June 1, 2015; Will Dupuy, interview; Jack Ingram, interview.

²⁷⁷ Stimeling, ““¡Viva Terlingua!”

²⁷⁸ Craig Hillis, “Michael Martin Murphey, and Jerry Jeff Walker: Poetic in Lyric, Message, and Musical Method,” in *Pickers & Poets: The Ruthlessly Poetic Singer-Songwriters from Texas*, ed. Craig Clifton and Craig Hillis (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2016), 77.

trouble with [Nashville songs] is they're too perfect." Austin music is "somewhere between perfect and half-perfect. The mistakes, we call that soul."²⁷⁹

In August of 1973, Walker retreated even further, to "a town where they barely have electricity," Luckenbach, 75 miles west of Austin. Using a mobile recording truck, Walker gathered a loose confederation of musicians and hangers on and recorded the most celebrated unpolished album in Texas history. While only two tracks, Ray Wylie Hubbard's "Up Against the Wall (Redneck Mother)" and Gary P. Nunn's "London Homesick Blues," were actually recorded with an audience, the entire album is recorded "live," meaning the musicians playing simultaneously, unseparated, and frequently with chatter, clapping and bystanders singing along. The album's "imprecise vocal performance, which includes tuning, control, and timing problems, adds an element of realism." For progressive country fans, leaving the mistakes in and the "loose vocal arrangements" gave the album an aura of authenticity that defined it as perhaps the most revered recording of the genre. Critics at the time who had dismissed progressive country as derivative before, "commented on how well it captured the organic, spontaneous nature of this new musical genre." For progressive country fans and their children who embraced Texas Country, consider the album, "a carefully constructed musical manifesto of Austin's emergent progressive country movement, conveying a sense of spontaneity and freedom to potential audiences and musicians with similar ideologies."²⁸⁰

²⁷⁹ Reid, *Improbable Rise*, 243.

²⁸⁰ Stimeling, "¡Viva Terlingua!"

In 1996, Arista records approached Keen. The major label was interested in opening a Texas division and saw Keen as a potential flagship artist. Upon accepting the offer, Keen decided to record one last album as a going away present for Sugar Hill, his label since 1989's *The Live Album*.²⁸¹ With an album of new material barely a year old, Keen opted to attempt to capture the excitement of his now high-energy live show. Keen chose John T. Floore's Country Store in Helotes, Texas, as the venue, a location near his home and heart.²⁸² Opened in 1942, Floore's had hosted Bob Wills, Hank Williams, Patsy Cline, Little Richard, Elvis Presley, Bob Dylan, and, frequently, Willie Nelson.²⁸³ Keen had dreamed of mounting the storied stage and finally did for the first time in 1990.

For the album, Keen enlisted steel guitar player Lloyd Maines to play and produce the record. Whitbeck's reaction to playing with the Lubbock sideman conveys the reverence other musicians held for Maines. On the way to play in Lubbock on April 20, 1995, "Robert 'says, 'Yeah, Lloyd's going to sit in.' And I'm like Lloyd Maines? This is like if you told me Hendrix is going to play. That just blew my mind." Maines and Keen had originally planned to cull the best performances from three live shows but after finishing the first night, Maines told the band, "I think we got it," and chose not to even record the other two shows. What appears on the release is what was recorded at the

²⁸¹ Freeman, "Inside REK's Inner Sanctum."

²⁸² Melinda Newman, "Robert Earl Keen Records Album Sequel 20 Years in the Making," *Rolling Stone*, September 22, 2016. accessed March 5, 2017, <http://www.rollingstone.com/country/news/robert-earl-keen-records-live-dinner-reunion-album-w441536>.

²⁸³ Michelle Burgess, "There's No Place Like Floore's: Texas Honky-Tonk Heaven in Helotes," *Texas Highways* (November 2013), accessed May 17, 2017, <http://www.texashighways.com/travel/item/476-there-s-no-place-like-john-t-floores-country-store-helotes>.

August 12, 1995, show, with the exception of one fiddle solo where a cord glitched and the addition of Whitbeck's backing vocals on "Going to Town."²⁸⁴ In the spirit of Walker's early recordings, Whitbeck explains the album is "ragged and raw because that's how we played."²⁸⁵ Two songs recorded acoustically a few weeks later at the Cactus Café supplemented the Floore's recording.

According to Dupuy, Brotherton later told him if he and Duckworth "had their druthers [they] would have gone out and bought up every single copy of *No. 2 Live Dinner*" to keep it out of the hands of fans. Musicians tend to see their mistakes as cringe-inducing failures, not authenticity generating marks of character. Fans felt differently. Jan Reid criticized that "on *No. 2 Live Dinner*, Keen performs similar vocal gymnastics, with similar results. The album captures the mood of his concerts but also songs that were hurried, times his voice broke, and some licks a guitarist would like to retrieve." For Texas Country fans, Keen's voice, falling in and out of key, even cracking at times, was the voice of their own progressive country revival. Dupuy enthused, "Hearing that party you want to be a part of that party. That's our party. It was our *Viva Terlingua!*"²⁸⁶

²⁸⁴ Coincidentally or not, *No. 2 Live Dinner* was recorded August 12, 1995, 23 years to the day after Willie Nelson's first appearance at the Armadillo.

²⁸⁵ Whitbeck, interview.; *No. 2 Live Dinner* was the first time the band played "Going to Town" and Keen asked Whitbeck to add backing vocals in later performances. Keen liked them and added them to the track. Will Dupuy believes there is one other solo overdubbed but even if this is true, the album is remarkably "live" and free of overdubs.

²⁸⁶ Dupuy, interview.

Among Texas Country artists, live albums were crucial, and frequent, attempts to convey the energy and excitement of the scene. Ingram, Morrow, Roger Creager, and Reckless Kelly each released live albums as one of their first four albums. Two of Green's first four releases are live recordings. The South Austin Jug Band, whose high energy improvisation filled live shows and quickly made them local legends, released an unaltered concert recording as their debut. Inspired by Keen, Texas Country artists strove to break down the mediating effects of studio recording and bring even distant fans into the immediate experience of the scene.

No. 2 Live Dinner, released March 19, 1996, would go on to be Keen's bestselling album, topping 100,000 copies in its first two years.²⁸⁷ He points to the album's release as "when it really took off."²⁸⁸ Keen saw the album as so central to his career, he returned to Floore's on the twentieth anniversary to record *Live Dinner Reunion*, this time with a host of Texas Country stars he had inspired, including Morrow covering "I'll Go on Downtown."

The recording boasts even more direct connections to the Texas Country scene. Green attended the show with Zintgraff and two other friends. Someone in Green's group, possibly Green, screamed "Red Raiders" after Keen introduced Maines as being from Lubbock, which the microphones picked up. Maines had only recently finished producing Green's upcoming debut, *Dancehall Dreamer* (1995), featuring Maines's daughter and soon-to-be Dixie Chicks lead singer Natalie on backing vocals. Maines had

²⁸⁷ McLeese, "Straight Outta Bandera."

²⁸⁸ Freeman, "Inside REK's Inner Sanctum."

already begun his role as the most important producer in Texas Country. Over the next two decades, Maines would produce not only Green's early records but also the first efforts of Morrow, Owen Temple, Roger Creager, Dub Miller, the South Austin Jug Band, Adam Carroll, and many others. While *Live No. 2 Dinner* was a seminal release for Texas Country fans generally, the album also introduced future Texas Country superstar Randy Rogers to the genre. Rogers first heard Keen his freshman year in college through his girlfriend. "That was it. I fell in love – drove to Luckenbach to see him play. I listened to that record five billion times – at least five billion. It was on at every party I went to, it was in my car. I started dreaming about being Robert."²⁸⁹

²⁸⁹

Rogers, interview.

V: 1998 to the Present

“I Play Americana”: 1997-1998

While a new generation of Texas Country artists might have been dreaming about being Keen, Keen was dreaming about being something else. Rod Bleetstein had begun his radio career at progressive country station KHIP in Monterey Bay, California in 1985. Soon after he joined, he and the station embraced Nashville’s class of 1986, regularly playing Keen’s confederates Lovett, Griffith, Earle, and other genre-challenging country artists. Disappointed that mainstream Nashville music weathered the challenge, Bleetstein continued to promote the sort of outside-the-box country he loved.²⁹⁰ In the summer of 1994, after working with Keen for a year, Bleetstein found himself at a party with staff from the *Gavin Report*, a music industry trade magazine that published a wide variety of subgenre charts. Bleetstein pointed to the success of alternative rock as a format and suggested there was room to market alternative country. Excited to learn many at Gavin held similar musical tastes, Bleetstein went home that night and outlined a proposal for what would become the Americana chart.²⁹¹

Bleetstein and *Gavin* premiered the chart, a crucial step in defining a set of artists as a genre, on January 20, 1995. The issue’s cover features Keen, prominently placed among Joe Ely, Lucinda Williams, Emmylou Harris, and Red Dirt founding father Jim Lauderdale. The inaugural Americana chart found Keen at number 6, nestled between his

²⁹⁰ Rod Bleetstein, “Another Country: The American Chart Turns 20,” *No Depression*, January 20, 2015, accessed May 17, 2017, <http://nodepression.com/article/another-country-americana-chart-turns-20>.

²⁹¹ Saviano, *Without Getting Killed or Caught*, 244-5.

old friends Griffith at number 2 and Lovett at number 7. Bleetstein's articles explained Americana music would appeal to "disenfranchised country listeners" the same way grunge had recently won over alienated rock fans. Americana would also include classic country legends such as Johnny Cash, George Jones, Waylon Jennings, and Merle Haggard. "It's steel guitars, mandolins, and acoustics rather than synthesizer and line dance mixes," Bleetstein declared. Keen, the first featured artist to be labelled Americana, predicted, "It's gonna blow the dust off all the diamonds in the rough."²⁹² Keen was delighted. "Finally, after years without a label for my music, I had a flag to rally around. Musically...lyrically, it's tougher, funnier, and more surreal, with narrative endings that would never pass muster in a focus group." After years of struggling to explain his style of music, he finally had an answer, "When a stranger asks what kind of music I play, I look them square in the eye and say 'I play Americana.'"²⁹³

As the modernist musical consensus gave way to postmodern pluralism, the music charts reflected this change. In 1976, the summer Keen met Lovett and began seriously considering a career in music, *Billboard Magazine*, the industry standard in song and album rankings, featured charts covering just five genres of American music: jazz, soul, country, easy listening, and rock.²⁹⁴ Less than two decades later in 1995, the year Gavin premiered the Americana chart, Billboard recognized fifteen different musical styles.²⁹⁵

²⁹² Rod Bleetstein, "American Moves to Another Country," *Gavin Report*, January 20, 1995, accessed May 17, 2017, <http://www.americanradiohistory.com/Archive-Gavin-Report/90/95/Gavin-1995-01-20.pdf>. 22-27.

²⁹³ Bleetstein, "Chart Turns 20."

²⁹⁴ "In This Issue," *Billboard Magazine*, June 12, 1976, 4.

²⁹⁵ "No. 1 in Billboard," *Billboard Magazine*, Decemeber 16, 1995, 5.

Genres are constructs of radio stations, promoters and record labels. Artists do not need defined genres to create music; the music business needs genres to sell music. The dramatic increase in the number of genres acknowledged by the music industry suggests radio stations and record labels had come to recognize the diversity of musical tastes in the U.S. market and were attempting to cater to what were once seen as niche musical styles. Through the act of defining and formally recognizing these genres, the national music industry was formally acknowledging what Texas Country fans had been embracing for years; a new generation of fans desired a more personalized musical experience. Both Texas Country and Americana fans had made a conscious decision to elevate a relatively obscure musical subgenre above nationwide, mainstream artists. By making this choice, fans created an identity for themselves, which they defined in opposition to the acceptance of a broad musical consensus. The limited commercial appeal of their chosen music was not seen as a failure but an authenticity generating necessity. As the growth in charts shows, this phenomenon was not limited to Americana or Texas Country, but a growing number of musical genres and subgenres were rapidly creating in music the pluralism associated with postmodernism.

The inability to define Keen's music had long created a problem in how to sell Keen's music. By defining a new genre with a chart and radio format, and placing Keen squarely at the center of this construct, Keen became attractive to record labels interested in engaging in the Americana business. This inspired Arista to open Arista Austin and to sign Keen as its flagship artist. These events only increased the tension between Keen's two musical personas. The Americana genre was not geared toward Keen's college-aged fans, but it was the rowdy crowd that drove album and ticket sales that had made him a

valuable property. Reid explained Keen's dilemma, "He found that he needs those noisy crowds and he needs to transcend them."²⁹⁶

Keen's next album, *Picnic* (1997), marked his major label debut. Despite the album's title and cover photo, presumably a picture of Keen's Mustang engulfed in flames at the 1974 picnic, the album was a conscious attempt to distance the artist from his fraternity crowd and capitalize on the newly defined Americana genre. Keen reflected on *Picnic*, "I'm signed with Arista, I have this worldwide connection here, and maybe some things that limit me are just particular regional references." Recorded in Atlanta with Arista producer John Keane, the experience of working with a major label stressed the veteran Keen out to the point his mouth broke out in ulcers that delayed the recording. The result is, "an edgier, guitar-driven sound that would be more alternative, less country."²⁹⁷

Evaluating *Picnic*, Keen observed, "I made the perfect compromise – I didn't make anybody happy."²⁹⁸ The album includes his trademarked storytelling ability, most notably "Shades of Gray," the tale of four classic Keen ne'er-do-wells who inadvertently get entangled in the Oklahoma City bombing manhunt. His black humor flashes in "Then Came Lo Mein." The album does not explore Keen's western themes and, Texas regionalism is absent. The lyrical theme of wistfulness for an agrarian past coupled with despair for the rural present, a common element in both Texas Country and Americana

²⁹⁶ Reid, "Cult of Keen."

²⁹⁷ McLeese, "Straight Outta Bandera."

²⁹⁸ McLeese, "Straight Outta Bandera."

songwriting, is powerfully presented in Keen's cover of James McMurtry's "Levelland." There is, perhaps, no better summation of this idea than McMurtry's lines:

Mama used to roll her hair, back before the central air.
We'd sit outside and watch the stars at night.
She'd tell me to make a wish; I'd wish we both could fly.
Don't think she's seen the sky since we got the satellite dish.²⁹⁹

It is worth noting McMurtry is son of author Larry McMurtry, an early explorer of such themes. Recording covers of other artists' songs is often a strategy artists, and labels, used to identify performers with genres. Keen's covers of Americana darlings McMurtry and longtime punkabilly roots rocker Dave Alvin helped establish Keen's embrace of the new format. Guest artists are another way to position an artist in a genre. *Picnic* features Cowboy Junkies singer Margo Timmons throughout, including a duet on "Then Came Lo Mein." The Canadian alternative country group was widely admired in Americana circles both for their recordings and for helping bring Townes Van Zandt to a younger audience as their opening act in 1990, an honor the revered songwriter repaid by writing "Cowboy Junkies Lament."³⁰⁰

The album sold 65,000 units in its first year; enough to please Arista but well under the 100,000 *No. 2 Live Dinner* had sold the year before.³⁰¹ The contrast is made even starker when considering *Picnic*, unlike any of Keen's earlier records, received the benefit of marketing and distribution of a major label. Keen professed ambivalence to the

²⁹⁹ James McMurtry, "Levelland," *Where'd You Hide the Body*, Columbia, 1995, CD.

³⁰⁰ Robert Earl Hardy, *A Deeper Blue: The Life and Music of Townes Van Zandt* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 2012), 214-17.

³⁰¹ McLeese, "Straight Outta Bandera."

album's reception among Texas Country fans. "If they like it, man, I'm glad," he says. "If they don't like it, I still made a record I'm proud of." As *Picnic* was released, Keen expressed his belief that his Texas Country following was stifling his dreams of nationwide Americana success. "I would love to go out with Wilco or Son Volt. I think it would be a great pairing, although I heard it through the grapevine from Wilco's management that they didn't really want to do anything with me because of the Rowdy Crowd."³⁰² Keen's frustration stemmed from the paradox of Americana as a genre. Just as Coyle and Dolan had explained about the 1960s folk scene, "it wasn't folk music at all. That is music known as folk was controlled by self-appointed custodians from the intelligentsia," Americana denied the preferences of the vast majority of Americans whose tastes failed to meet their elevated standards.³⁰³

"The Devil's Spawn": 1998-2001

In 1998, Keen established his own music festival, launching Robert Earl Keen's Texas Music Uprising that Memorial Day weekend in Dallas and again the next night in the Woodlands, near Houston. Keen strove to bring an eclectic lineup to the event putting Earle, Ely, Austin guitar hero Ian Moore, blues rockers Storyville, and Jack Ingram, now largely unassociated with the Texas Country movement since his signing with Sony Records, on the bill. Charlie Robison, momentarily a Texas Country star, and a little known Reckless Kelly, managed by Robert Earl and Kathleen, made up the Texas

³⁰² Gray, "One More Image."; Wilco and Son Volt were the two bands that emerged from the break-up of the late 1980s Chicago alternative country band Uncle Tupelo, considered a key forerunner of the Americana movement.

³⁰³ Coyle and Dolan, "Modelling Authenticity," 26.

Country contingent.³⁰⁴ The next year Moore, Ingram, Robison, and Reckless Kelly returned, joined by the psychobilly Reverend Horton Heat, the guit-steel honky-tonk country of Junior Brown and an ascendant Pat Green. To Keen's chagrin, as the festival grew, the need to sell tickets derailed his eclectic dreams, and the shows became more and more a celebration of Texas Country.³⁰⁵ "At first we had like Joe Ely and Steve Earle, but we also had Storyville and Los Lobos.... And then the Texas scene started really congealing, and some of these radio stations started taking over some of these deals, so they were saying, "Oh no, it has to be all Texas." And that's when I started fighting some of these things."³⁰⁶ Beginning in 2000, Keen found some relief by staging extra Uprising dates in California to regain control over the lineup.³⁰⁷

As Texas Country audiences grew, Keen wearied of the musical movement he inspired. "I started hearing stuff that I didn't think was as good as some of the stuff that I was doing," he lamented. Keen's frustration became public in an interview published in the *Houston Press* on September 20, 2001. The interviewer, Rob Patterson, had already become notorious to Texas Country fans for slights such as describing Pat Green as "execrable" and Adam Carroll as "thoroughly unoriginal and clichéd."³⁰⁸ Patterson began

³⁰⁴ "Robert Earl Keen Starts A Revolution -- The Texas Uprising 1998", PRN Newswire, May 5, 1998. accessed May 16, 2017, <http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/robert-earl-keen-starts-a-revolution----the-texas-uprising-1998-77767512.html>.

³⁰⁵ Bob Ruggiero, "Rise Up, Texas," *Houston Press*, May 20, 1999.; Guit-steel is Brown's own invention, an instrument that allows the virtuoso to play electric and steel guitar at the same time.

³⁰⁶ Skanse, "A Man Apart."

³⁰⁷ Scott Schinder, "Q&A: Robert Earl Keen," *Lone Star Music Magazine*, August 1, 2001. accessed May 17, 2017, <http://lonestarmusicmagazine.com/qa-robert-earl-keen-2/>.

³⁰⁸ Rob Patterson, "Out Here," *Dallas Observer*, October 7, 1999.

the piece by claiming, “Genuine Texas music buffs, people who discern and love quality writers and artists,” don’t like Keen, dismissing him as a “collegiate act.” Keen railed, “It pisses me off. ‘There was a magazine that refused to review [his latest album *Gravitational Forces*] according to the publicist at my record label, because, they said, ‘He’s too much of a frat party band.’” Keen stressed he “came from the basement coffeehouse,” and was never a member of a fraternity.³⁰⁹

Keen’s most caustic remarks came when asked about his role in inspiring artists such as Morrow and Green. “Do you think inspired is the right word?” he ponders. “Spawned is more the right word – the devil’s spawn.” Green is singled out, with Keen explaining, “He’s come to so many of my shows, and when he sees me, he always holds his hat in his hand like he’s meeting the president or something. And he tells me how he wishes we could spend some quality time together. And I’m like, ‘Well, call me, here’s my phone number.’ And he never calls me.” Keen continues on, claiming some of the new crop of Texas musicians are “terrible,” before appreciating the rowdy crowd with, “I’ve made a lot of money off them, and things are good. They like it; I like it,” then bemoaning their tendency to be “overbearing,” and “ill-mannered” at times. The article concludes with Patterson and Keen contemplating if Keen’s current release, *Walking Distance* (2001), is a deliberate attempt to drive the rowdy crowd away.³¹⁰

Keen had long been unimpressed with many of his disciples. Ingram recalled when he was regularly opening shows for Keen in the early 1990s, “Robert wasn’t very

³⁰⁹ Rob Patterson, “A Polished Razor Keen,” *Houston Observer*, September 20, 2001.

³¹⁰ Patterson, “A Polished Razor Keen.”

friendly.”³¹¹ Ingram explained, “He hated me because I handed him the first record I ever made. It was the only impression of me he ever made. He said to himself, ‘This shit sucks and people are comparing him to me.’ I don’t begrudge him that. I understand that feeling now.” The experience taught Ingram a valuable lesson. Ultimately, reflecting on Keen’s reaction led Ingram to embrace and support the Texas Country artists who came later. “I didn’t like it when a guy I looked up to wrote me off on his first impression. So I said, ‘Let me re-evaluate this right now so I don’t get caught being pissed off for a lot of years.’”³¹² As for Keen, the bad blood continued to simmer. In 2001, Ingram released a single titled “Mustang Burn,” which began, “I don’t give a damn that your car is on fire.” While the exact source of the feud has never been made public, the song is clearly a reference to Keen’s immolated Mustang and Jack’s belief that Keen “think(s) I’m a liar.”³¹³

“The Road Goes On...”: 2002-Present

In recent years, Keen’s career and influence have been enshrined with his 2012 induction into the Texas Heritage Songwriters Association Hall of Fame.³¹⁴ Keen has been prolific in the twenty-first century, releasing his twelfth studio CD in 2015, to go along with his seven live albums and a greatest hits collection. In 1997, Keen earned his first *Austin City Limits* taping as a featured artist (paired with Ingram), with his second

³¹¹ Ingram, interview.

³¹² Andy Langer, “Wedding Vows,” *Austin Chronicle*, November 4, 2005.

³¹³ Nancy Dunham, “Jack Ingram Lets His Guitar Do the Talking,” *The Boot*, July 29, 2010, accessed May 18, 2017, <http://theboot.com/jack-ingram-thats-a-man-lyrics/>

³¹⁴ “Robert Earl Keen,” Texas Heritage Songwriters Hall of Fame, accessed May 22, 2017, <http://www.texasheritagesongwriters.com/inductee/robert-earl-keen/>.

coming in 2009.³¹⁵ Whether due to Keen's marketing strategies, inflammatory comments, or the overall evolution of the Texas Country scene, according to Whitbeck, since 2002 the massive, raucous crowds have dissipated. Keen continues to record and tour and remains a revered and oft-covered figure in Texas music, but his live shows have come to resemble the tamer, more genteel atmosphere of his old friend Lovett.³¹⁶ Over time Keen has also come to embrace many of those he inspired. Robert Earl and Kathleen managed and toured with Reckless Kelly in the early 2000s. Keen and Ingram have patched up their differences. On May 26, 2016, the two were in a select group that included, among others, Steve Earle, Terry Allen, Emmylou Harris, Lyle Lovett, and Joe Ely who gathered to celebrate the life of Guy Clark days after his passing.³¹⁷ The pair have also given interviews together about Texas Music a number of times in recent years.³¹⁸

In 2008, at his annual MusicFest ski vacation in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, Texas Country music promoter John Dickson feted Keen with more than twenty Texas Country and Red Dirt stars covering songs spanning Keen's long career.³¹⁹ Dickson had begun as a promoter while still a Southwest Texas State University student in 1982. Tending bar at the Gristmill Restaurant, Dickson became an early fan of George Strait,

³¹⁵ "Robert Earl Keen," Austin City Limits, accessed May 22, 2017, <http://acltv.com/artist/robert-earl-keen/>.

³¹⁶ Whitbeck, interview.

³¹⁷ Saviano, "Without Getting Killed or Caught," 350.

³¹⁸ John Spong, "Pitch Perfect," *Texas Monthly*, August, 2009.; Jeremy Burchard, "The State of Country Music," *GrammyPro*, June 20, 106, accessed May 18, 2017, <https://www.grammypro.com/texas/blogs/state-country-music-conversation-jack-ingram-and-robert-earl-keen>.

³¹⁹ Various Artists, *Undone: A Musicfest Tribute to Robert Earl Keen*, Right Ave., 2009, CD.

who regularly played the next door at venerable Gruene Hall. In the 1990s, Keen had teamed up with Ingram, Green, Morrow, and virtually every other act in the Texas Country scene to put on shows.³²⁰ He used these connections to assemble a who's who of Texas Country and Red Dirt for *Undone: A Musicfest Tribute to Robert Earl Keen* (2009), including Reckless Kelly, Cory Morrow, Cody Canada, Dub Miller, Randy Rogers, and Roger Creager.³²¹

Keen seemed to finally accept his role as the father of Texas Country, reacting to the honor graciously. "I thought that was nice. And I like everybody that's included in that — the Cross Canadian guys, the Reckless Kelly guys, the Randy Rogers guys — I love all those guys. And I like a lot of their music. All that stuff is cool." Keen hedged his absolution, adding, "There was just, you know, some other stuff [from that scene] that wasn't quite as cool. In that world, sometimes I liked the stuff that was further away from me than close to me. I wasn't looking for somebody that was playing stuff just like me, I wanted to hear something else."³²² In 2015, Keen used the *Live Dinner Reunion* recording to further express his acceptance of his disciples. Morrow, Cody Braun of Reckless Kelly, Cody Canada, and Bruce Robison join old Keen collaborators Lyle Lovett and Joe Ely on stage in the celebration.³²³

³²⁰ Dickson, interview by author, Buda, TX, March 4, 2016.

³²¹ Various Artists, *Undone*.

³²² Skanse, "A Man Apart."

³²³ Robert Earl Keen, *Live Dinner Reunion*, Dualtone Records, 2016, CD.

The one artist Keen has yet to embrace, and presumably the one “that wasn’t quite as cool,” is Pat Green. A frequent performer at MusicFest and a paying patron at the original *No. 2 Live Dinner* recording, Green does not appear on either *Undone* or *Live Dinner Reunion*. Embracing Green, the best-selling Texas Country artist of all and the first to surpass Keen as a concert draw in the scene, seems to be something Keen is not willing to do, even as he, at long last, becomes comfortable with his role in creating Texas Country.

Conclusion: “Along the Way a Culture is Created”

In his teenage years, Robert Earl Keen rejected the rapid modernization embraced by his hometown of Houston to construct his identity through “performing the Texan.” This involved embracing older, unfashionable bluegrass music and engaging in the ascending progressive country scene in the 1970s. At Texas A&M, Keen transitioned from fan to performer before moving to Austin in 1981 to begin a career as a professional musician. In 1984, he released the first of a string of albums that would serve as the primary inspirations for the Texas Country scene of the 1990s. Over the first two decades of his career, Keen established a series of templates artists such as Jack Ingram, Pat Green, and Cory Morrow emulated to create the Texas Country sound.

Keen’s failure to achieve stardom in Nashville only bolstered his standing in the eyes of young fans’ rejection of what they perceived as the superorganic, overproduced music that dominated a homogenized country radio. Embracing a regional artist who celebrated Texas themes, Texas Country fans constructed their own notions of authenticity around Keen’s provincial themes and embraced his imperfections. In this

way, Keen fans themselves “performed the Texan,” with Keen serving as their first avatar. Early college-age fans travelled across the state creating a trans-local scene that would see fans such as Green, Morrow, and others become celebrated performers in their own right. As fan-turned-performer Dub Miller explained, “Along the way a culture was created.”³²⁴

As Keen’s rowdy crowds grew, the one-time folkie yearned for the more subdued respectability of his songwriting heroes and colleagues Guy Clark, Townes Van Zandt, and Lyle Lovett. When an insurgent group of industry personnel set out to construct a new genre, he embraced the opportunity but felt himself restrained by his younger fans. Keen, at best ambivalent about his younger fans and the artists he inspired, lashed out, criticizing his own musical descendants. He engaged in marketing strategies specifically designed to cool his young fan’s ardor as he signed with a major label and positioned himself in the vanguard of the Americana movement. Ultimately, Keen would come to terms with his musical legacy, accepting his role as the father of Texas Country.

Keen’s statewide acclaim and drawing power despite his lack of major label support established the artist as an important figure in Texas music. His central role in the Americana movement insured his place beyond the state’s borders. Ultimately, however, Keen’s most significant contribution to the state’s musical history lay in pioneering the musical style and establishing the initial rowdy crowds for Texas Country. In 1996, Keen disciple Ingram’s growing fanbase earned the twenty-five-year-old a Sony record deal. Within three years, avowed Keen acolytes Morrow and Green achieved previously

³²⁴ Miller, interview.

undreamt of drawing power statewide for artists lacking established booking agents or even minor label support.

As the twenty-first century dawned, a third generation of Texas Country artists, those reared on Keen but more directly inspired by Morrow and Green, drew crowds, large and small, virtually every night of the week in college towns across Texas. Performers such as Randy Rogers, Reckless Kelly, Roger Creager, Kevin Fowler, and dozens more became stars in the Texas Country scene. Young Texans filled the bars and honky-tonks they played, forming their identities through their relationship to the music and each other and taking their turn to perform the Texan as McMurtry had predicted.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

- “At Home in Texas -Robert Earl and Kathleen Keen.” April 1, 2010.
<http://www.comanchetrace.com/blog/at-home-in-texas-2> (Accessed February 24, 2017).
- "No Kinda Dancer." *Billboard Magazine*, November 3, 1984.
- “Robert Earl Keen.” Austin City Limits. <http://acltv.com/artist/robert-earl-keen/> (Accessed May 22, 2017).
- “Robert Earl Keen.” Texas Heritage Songwriters Hall of Fame.
<http://www.texasheritagesongwriters.com/inductee/robert-earl-keen/> (Accessed May 22, 2017.)
- “Robert Earl Keen Starts A Revolution -- The Texas Uprising 1998.” *PRN Newswire*, May 5, 1998. <http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/robert-earl-keen-starts-a-revolution---the-texas-uprising-1998-77767512.html>. (Accessed May 16, 2017).
- “The Live Album.” *Billboard Magazine*, January 14, 1989.
- Basse, Shermakaye. "TH Moment: Robert Earl Keen." *Texas Highways*, June 2009.
<https://www.texashighways.com/blog/item/133-a-th-moment-with-robert-earl-keen>
(Accessed February 7, 2017).
- Beal, Jim Jr.. “Country Singer Brings His ‘World Tour’ to San Antonio.” *San Antonio Express-News*, October 15, 1991.
- .“Night Lights: Willie to Wail from the Floore, Wednesday.” *San Antonio Express-News*, July 23, 1991.
- Benson, Ray. “Robert Earl Keen is our featured ‘Texas Legend’ on the Texas Music Scene.” YouTube video, 4:11. posted by "The Texas Music Scene TV," March 6, 2011.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8q9C7_VUP-U.
- Berkman, C.J.. “Night Lights: Electric Shaver Heads Country/Swing Invasion.” *San Antonio Express-News*, February 22, 1991.
- Blackstock, Peter. “Keen’s West Textures is a Testament to the Songwriter’s Honesty, Eloquence.” *Austin American-Statesman*, November 30, 1989.
- Bleetstein, Rod. “American Moves to Another Country.” *Gavin Report*. January 20, 1995.
<http://www.americanradiohistory.com/Archive-Gavin-Report/90/95/Gavin-1995-01-20.pdf>. 22-27. (Accessed May 17, 2017)
- .“Another Country: The American Chart Turns 20.” *No Depression*. January 20, 2015.
<http://nodepression.com/article/another-country-americana-chart-turns-20>. (Accessed May 17, 2017).

- Burchard, Jeremy. "The State of Country Music." *GrammyPro*. June 20, 106.
<https://www.grammypro.com/texas/blogs/state-country-music-conversation-jack-ingram-and-robert-earl-keen>. (Accessed May 18, 2017).
- Burgess, Michelle. "There's No Place Like Floore's: Texas Honky-Tonk Heaven in Helotes." *Texas Highways*. November, 2013. <http://www.texashighways.com/travel/item/476-there-s-no-place-like-john-t-floores-country-store-helotes>. (Accessed May 17, 2017).
- Caligiuri, Jim. "Pat Green's Controversial Brand of 'Texas Music'." *Austin Chronicle*, October 19, 2001.
- Claypool, Robert. "He's Not Keen on Nashville." *Houston Chronicle*, December 28, 1988.
- Corcoran, Michael. "Keen Desire – A Great Texas Singer-Songwriter is Losing His Undiscovered Status." *Dallas Morning News*, May 13, 1993.
- Davis, John T. "Keen Focus - Texas singer fills out his stories with the inspiration of birth, lovers' fatal quarrels and Monty Python." *Austin American-Statesman*, September 22, 1994.
- . "Kerrville Awards Are Lovefest for Keen." *Austin American-Statesman*, September 22, 1994.
- Dunham, Nancy. "Jack Ingram Lets His Guitar Do the Talking." *The Boot*. July 29, 2010.
<http://theboot.com/jack-ingram-thats-a-man-lyrics/>. (Accessed May 18, 2017).
- Fink, Matt. "Legend: Robert Earl Keen." *American Songwriter*, January 14, 2010.
<https://americansongwriter.com/2010/01/legends-robert-earl-keen/> (Accessed January 27, 2017).
- Forster, Nick. "Episode #1643 Robert Earl Keen/John Fullbright." October 26, 2016. etown.org:
<https://www.etown.org/broadcasts/robert-earl-keen-john-fullbright/> (Accessed January 15, 2017).
- Freeman, Danny. "Robert Earl Keen: Inside REK's Inner Sanctum, the Scriptorium." *Austin Chronicle*, January 30, 2015.
- Freeman, Doug. "Beyond the Bourbon Legend: Jason Boland Back in the Saddle." *Austin Chronicle*, April 10, 2009.
- Gleason, Holly. "Wisdom & Poetry: The Mastery of Rodney Crowell." *East Nashvillian*, March/April, 2017.
- Gray, Christopher. "One More Image: Robert Earl Keen Searches for..." *Austin Chronicle*, April 25, 1997.
- Hall, Michael. "On the Porch With Robert and Lyle." *Texas Monthly*, July 2015.
<http://www.texasmonthly.com/the-culture/on-the-porch-with-robert-and-lyle/> (Accessed January 27, 2017).
- . "The Secret History of Texas Music." *Texas Monthly*, June 2015.

- Hollandsworth, Skip. "With Envy." *Texas Monthly*, June 2002. 84-87, 119-121.
- Hook, Peter. *Unknown Pleasures: Inside New Order*. New York: HarperCollins, 2013.
- .*Substance: Inside New Order*. New York City: HarperCollins, 2017.
- Jenkins, Shirley. "Keen-Do Guy: Robert Earl Keen and Fort Worth Go Together Like Peas and Carrots." *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, August 14, 1994.
- ."New Country Stars Didn't Stay in Saddle Long." *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*. September 28, 1996.
- Kemp, Matt. "Robert Earl Keen: Confessions of a Front Porch Picker." *Acoustic Guitar*, January 15, 2016. <http://acousticguitar.com/robert-earl-keen-confessions-of-a-front-porch-picker/> (Accessed January 13, 2017).
- King, Jim. "Robert Earl Keen and Jim King of the Road." YouTube, September 27, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ln7XlQtcJzU> (Accessed February 1, 2017).
- Knight, Chris, host. "Episode 1: Pat Green and Cory Morrow." *Inside Texas Country*. Lone Star 93.3 KXMG. March 4, 2000.
- Lane, Chris. "The Changing Face of Houston: Sharpstown Then and Now." Houston Press, September 15, 2014. <http://www.houstonpress.com/arts/the-changing-face-of-houston-sharpstown-then-and-now-6375569> (Accessed February 14, 2017).
- Langer, Andy. "Wedding Vows." *Austin Chronicle*, November 4, 2005.
- ."A Bit of Banter Between Robert Earl Keen and Lyle Lovett." *Texas Monthly*, May 28, 2013.
- McLeese, Don. "Keen Fine Tunes for Paramount Show." *Austin American-Statesman*, October 4, 1994.
- ."Prodigal Son Returns Home – Keen Reconnects with Texas Audiences After an Unsuccessful Try at Nashville." *Austin American-Statesman*, March 4, 1993.
- ."Robert Earl Keen – Straight Outta Bandera." *No Depression*, October 31, 1998. <http://nodepression.com/article/robert-earl-keen-straight-outta-bandera>. (Accessed November 19, 2016).
- McMurtry, Larry. *In an Narrow Grave: Essays on Texas*. New York City: Dial Press, 1968.
- .*The Last Picture Show*. New York City: Dial Press, 1966.
- McNeil, Legs and Gillian McCain. *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk*. New York: Grove Press, 1996.
- Monahan, Casey. "Austin City Limits Spotlights Local Talent." *Austin American-Statesman*, March 31, 1989.

- . “New Local Record Label Signs Lounge Lizards.” *Austin American-Statesman*, May 27, 1989.
- . “Keen Releases Solid *West Textures*.” *Austin American-Statesman*, October 28, 1989.
- Newman, Michael. “Robert Earl Keen Records Album Sequel 20 Years in the Making.” *Rolling Stone*, September 22, 2016. <http://www.rollingstone.com/country/news/robert-earl-keen-records-live-dinner-reunion-album-w441536>. (Accessed March 5, 2017).
- Nichols, Lee. “This Guy is Everywhere.” *Austin Chronicle*, November 8, 1996.
- Patterson, Rob. “A Polished Razor Keen.” *Houston Observer*, September 20, 2001.
- . “Out Here.” *Dallas Observer*, October 7, 1999.
- Purcell, Jeff. “All Hands on Deck.” *The Guardian*. February 26, 2009.
- Reid, Jan. “The Cult of Keen.” *Texas Monthly*, April 1996.
- Ruggiero, Bob. “Rise Up, Texas.” *Houston Press*, May 20, 1999.
- Sagal, Peter. “Not My Job: Singer Robert Earl Keen Gets Quizzed On Cats.” March 7, 2015. www.npr.org: <http://www.npr.org/2015/03/07/391201196/not-my-job-singer-robert-earl-keen-gets-quizzed-on-cats> (Accessed February 15, 2017).
- Schinder, Scott. “Q&A: Robert Earl Keen.” *Lone Star Music Magazine* August 1, 2001. <http://lonestarmusicmagazine.com/qa-robert-earl-keen-2/>. (Accessed May 17, 2017).
- Schoemer, Karen. “Expect the Unexpected - Music: On the road with Sheryl Crow, surprise superstar. Still more surprises: Keith Richards and Satchmo, C&W sidemen. Gershwin that's not boring. Two new faces. And...Tom Jones?.” *Newsweek*. October 24, 1994. <http://www.newsweek.com/expect-unexpected-189464>. (accessed March 15, 2017)
- Skanse, Richard. “Robert Earl Keen: A Man Apart.” *LoneStarMusic.com*. Sept/Oct 2011. https://www.lonestarmusic.com/magazine/mag_html/septoct11/coverstore.html (accessed January 24, 2017).
- Solomon, Dan. “Exclusive Q&A: Robert Earl Keen Explains Why He’s Going Bluegrass on His New Album.” *Texas Monthly*, October 29, 2014.
- Spong, John. “Pitch Perfect.” *Texas Monthly*, August, 2009.
- Wallace, Christian. “Robert Earl Keen and Lyle Lovett Turn Gruene Hall Into Their Front Porch.” *Texas Monthly*, November 18, 2016.
- Weitz, Matt. “Facing the Music.” *Dallas Observer*, January 29, 1998.

Recordings

- Keen, Robert Earl, Jr. *No Kinda Dancer*. Philo. 1984.
- . *The Live Album*. Sugar Hill. 1988.

Keen, Robert Earl

—. *West Textures*. Sugar Hill. 1989.

—. *A Bigger Piece of Sky*. Sugar Hill. 1993.

—. *Gringo Honeymoon*. Sugar Hill. 1994.

—. *No. 2 Live Dinner*. Sugar Hill. 1996.

—. *Picnic*. Arista. 1997.

—. *Live Dinner Reunion*. Dualtone Music. 2016.

Various artists. *A Musicfest Tribute to Robert Earl Keen*. Right Ave. 2009.

Oral History with Author

Allen, Brandon. Lufkin, TX, May 13, 2017.

Anthony, Brendon. Austin, TX, June 1, 2015.

—. Austin, TX, October 28, 2016.

Braun, Mickey. Austin, TX, January 31, 2017.

Dickson, John. Austin, TX, March 4, 2016.

Dupuy, Will. Austin, TX, November 12, 2016

—. Austin, TX. December 2, 2016.

Elliott, Jeremy. Austin, TX. August 22, 2016.

Green, Pat. Fort Worth, TX, February 4, 2017.

Harris, Stephen. Fredericksburg, TX, November 29, 2016.

Henry, David. Lubbock, TX, August 28, 2016.

Henry, Greg. Buda, TX, January 24, 2017.

Henry, Robert. Los Angeles, CA, November 15, 2016.

Hyland, James. Austin, TX, April 11, 2016.

Ingram, Jack. Dallas, TX, February 29, 2016.

—. Ruidoso, NM, March 13, 2016.

Kilian, Michael. Austin, TX, February 21, 2017.

Maines, Lloyd. Austin, TX, October 26, 2016.

Miller, Dub. Mason, TX, October 25, 2016.

Powell, Matt. Austin, TX, February 22, 2016.

Rogers, Randy. College Station, TX, October 28, 2016.

Rung, Brian. College Station, TX, February 22, 2016.

Stein, Ricky. New York City, NY, February 27, 2017.

Whitbeck, Bill. Kyle, TX, March 12, 2016.

—. Austin, TX, February 27, 2016.

Whitley, Zach. Austin, TX, October 27, 2016.

Whittemore, Jason. Austin, TX, January 23, 2017.

Wolfe, John Clay. Dallas, TX, February 22, 2016.

Zintgraff, Brian. San Antonio, TX, February 20, 2017.

Secondary Sources

- Barefield, E. R. "The Kerrville Folk Festival and the Path to Kerr-Vision." *The Journal of Texas Music History* 1, no. 1 (2011): 22-38.
- Bealle, John. "DIY Music and Scene Theory." Academia.edu. April 13, 2013.
https://www.academia.edu/4406896/DIY_Music_and_Scene_Theory (accessed May 3, 2016).
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations*. Translated by Hannah Arendt, 214-8. London: Fontana, 1968.
- Bennett, Andy, and Richard A. Peterson. *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal and Virtual*. Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2004.
- Britton, Amy. "Situationism Explained! and Its Affect on Punk and Pop Culture," *Louder Than War*. July 20, 2012. <http://louderthanwar.com/situationism-explained-affect-punk-pop-culture/> (accessed June 1, 2017).
- Clifton, Craig and Craig Hillis, Editors, *Pickers & Poets: The Ruthlessly Poetic Singer-Songwriters from Texas*. College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2016
- Coppock, Doug. "Kerrville Folk Festival New Folk Finalist History." Happenstance-Music.
http://www.happenstance-music.com/KFF_History.asp. (Accessed April 1, 2017).
- Cowie, Jefferson. *Stayin' Alive: The Last Days of the 1970s and the Working Class*. New York: The New Press, 2012.

- Coyle, Michael and Jon Dolan, "Modelling Authenticity." In *Reading Rock and Roll: Authenticity, Appropriation, Aesthetics*, edited by Kevin J. H. Dettmar and William Richey, 17-36. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.
- Filene, Benjamin. *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000.
- Frith, Simon. *The Sociology of Rock*. London: Constable, 1978.
- . "Music and Identity." In *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay, 108-127. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996.
- Garrett, Danny. *Weird Yet Strange: Notes from an Austin Music Scene Artist*. Fort Worth, TX: TCU Press, 2015.
- Hall, Stuart and Tony Jefferson. *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*. London: Hutchinson, 1976.
- Hardy, Robert Earl. *A Deeper Blue: The Life and Music of Townes Van Zandt*. Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 2012.
- Hartman, Gary. *The History of Texas Music*. College Station: Texas A & M UP, 2008.
- Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture, the Meaning of Style*. London: Methuen, 1979.
- Herndon, John. "Rednecks Have Keen Insight." *Austin American-Statesman*, October 26, 1995.
- Hooker, Mike. "When We Were Young and There Were Rats on the Wall: Punk in Austin, the Raul's Years." *The Journal of Texas Music History* 13, no. 1 (2013): 40-55.
- Hubbs, Nadine. *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014.
- Malone, Bill C. and Jocelyn R.. *Country Music, U.S.A.*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010.
- Mellard, Jason. *Progressive Country: How the 1970s Transformed the Texan in Popular Culture*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013.
- Macnie, Jim. "Steve Earle Bio." *Rolling Stone*. <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/artists/steve-earle/biography>. (Accessed May 1, 2017).
- Orvell, Miles. *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture 1880-1940*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989.
- Pecknold, Diane. *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Peña, Manuel H. *Música Tejana: The Cultural Economy of Artistic Transformation*. College Station: Texas A & M UP, 1999.
- Reid, Jan. *The Improbable Rise of Redneck Rock: New Edition*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004.

- Riesman, David. "Listening to Popular Music." *American Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (1950): 359.
- Roseberry, William. "The Rise of Yuppie Coffee and the Reimagining of Class in the United States." *American Anthropologist New Series* 98, vol.4 (December, 1996) 762-75.
- Saviano, Tamara. *Without Getting Killed or Caught: The Life and Music of Guy Clark*. College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2016.
- Shank, Barry. *Dissonant Identities: The Rock'n'Roll Scene in Austin, Texas*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994.
- Silverman, Jonathan. *Nine Choices: Johnny Cash and American Culture*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010.
- Slobin, Mark. *Subculture Sounds: Micromusic of the West*. Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1993.
- Stimeling, Travis. *Cosmic Cowboys and New Hicks: Countercultural Sounds of Austin's Progressive Country Music Scene*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- . "¡Viva Terlingua!: Jerry Jeff Walker, Live Recordings, and the Authenticity of Progressive Country Music." *The Journal of Texas Music History* 8, no. 1, 2008: 20-32.
- Straw, Will. "Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Communities and Scenes in Popular Music." *Cultural Studies*, 1991: 368-388.