



Among the large contingent of talented songwriters who emerged in Texas in the 1980s and 1990s, Robert Earl Keen struck an unusual balance between sensitive story-portraits ("Corpus Christi Bay") and raucous barroom fun ("That Buckin' Song").

These two song types in Keen's output were unified by a mordant sense of humor that strongly influenced the early practitioners of what would become known as alternative country music. Keen, the son of an oil executive father and an attorney mother, is a native of Houston. His parents enjoyed both folk and country music, and his own style would land between those genres. Keen wrote poetry while he was in high school, but it wasn't until he went to journalism school at musically fertile Texas A&M that he learned to play the guitar. He and Lyle Lovett became friends and co-wrote a song, "This Old Porch," which both later recorded.

Keen made a splash in Austin with his debut album, *No Kinda Dancer*, self-financed in 1984 for \$4500. He moved to Nashville during the heady experimentalism of the 1980s that saw Lovett and k.d. lang hit the country scene, but he soon returned to Austin. Texas landscapes and residents provided him with creative inspiration, as his second album, *West Textures*,

made clear. That album yielded one of Keen's signature numbers, an ambitious crime-spree song called "The Road Goes on Forever."

By then signed to Sugar Hill, Keen recorded a live album shortly after *West Textures* but waited several years to release a studio follow-up, 1993's *A Bigger Piece of Sky*. After that album (which contained "Corpus Christi Bay") came *Gringo Honeymoon* (1994), which merged Keen's story songs with the emerging sounds of alt-country. Gurf Morlix, who later produced albums for both Keen and Lucinda Williams, played guitar. A young Gillian Welch provided harmony vocals.

Once again, after taking his career to a new stage, Keen recorded a live album *No. 2 Live Dinner*, (1996) and took time to accumulate new material. The 1997 album *Picnic*, his first for the Arista Texas label, again moved in the direction of alternative country, featuring Keen in a duet with the Cowboy Junkies' Margo Timmins, while 1998's *Walking Distance* featured sparer textures. Whatever production style surrounded his songs, Keen's musical personality seemed consistent, and his live shows, widely known thanks to a touring schedule that often approached 200 dates a year in the 1990s, grew organically, in depth and control.

In the early 2000s Keen signed with the Lost Highway label and released the album *Gravitational Forces* (2001). He also devoted time to his influential annual concert series and talent festival, Texas Uprising, which took place at several venues around Texas and the Far West. *Farm Fresh Onions* (2003), *What I Really Mean* (2005) and *Robert Earl Keen Best* (2007) were released on Koch. ~ James Manheim, All Music Guide