

THE JOURNAL OF
TEXAS MUSIC HISTORY

2023 | V23

The Career of Black Rock Maverick
Bevis M. Griffin

Music in Austin before the Armadillo

Robert Earl Keen's Texas

TEXAS  STATE
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LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR



DJ Smakola, Bevis Griffin, Jason Mellard, Kahron Spearman, Jason Crouch at Texas State University, November 2022.

This issue marks a moment of transition for *The Journal of Texas Music History*, as you will note from some of the new names on the masthead. To begin with, we wish a fond farewell to our founding art director and designer César Limón Delgado, who has done so much over the journal's two-decade run to determine its classic look and feel. We welcome our new art director Savannah Menchaca-Trujillo to continue to bring you the visual focus that César has so long imprinted on our publications. As noted in the last issue, too, we have a change in the Center's administrative assistant position. Avery Armstrong will be stepping into Kristi Madden's former role to coordinate the journal's distribution and the Center's programs and events.

In the past academic year, the Center has offered a range of programs that have included visits by Veronique Medrano to talk about Freddy Fender, Harold McMillan on Austin blues and jazz history, Lance Scott Walker and DaLyah Jones on DJ Screw, Tara Lopez on El Paso punk, and glam rocker Bevis Griffin with Kahron Spearman. We have had class visits, too, with author Michael Corcoran, Armadillo World Headquarters and Threadgill's proprietor Eddie Wilson, and officials from the Texas Historical Commission. We were also able to take Texas State music history students on our study abroad program in Chester, England, again to explore the transatlantic ties of folk, rock, and blues music.

This year's journal contains two compelling artist profiles. One of these artists is firmly in the pantheon of Texas music, and, after reading the profile of the second one, I think you can see why perhaps he should be, too. Rich Kelly brings us a new look at Robert Earl Keen's early career with a focus on historicizing his songcraft. Jason Crouch offers an oral history of Bevis Griffin, an artist who deserves a higher profile in the ways we think about Texas music. From Southern California by way of Wichita Falls, Griffin was a drummer and singer-songwriter in Austin's glam and hard rock scenes of the 1970s before moving on to New York in the 1980s as a significant voice in the Black Rock Coalition. Historian Michael Schmidt closes out the issue with an introduction to his digital humanities project Local Memory that explores Austin's music and venue history in the middle

decades of the twentieth century before the more recognizable narratives of the 1960s counterculture take root.

The Center looks forward to upcoming events and collaborations on the subjects of Houston rhythm and blues, Robert Johnson, George Strait, big band jazz, music heritage tourism, and more. In our John and Robin Dickson Series at Texas A&M Press, we anticipate new volumes on Willie Nelson's picnic, Terri Hendrix, and other subjects, as well as a new paperback edition of Craig Hillis and Craig Clifford's edited collection *Pickers & Poets: The Ruthlessly Poetic Singer-Songwriters of Texas*.

To learn more about the Center, please contact us or visit our website. As a reminder, the journal is also available online at www.txstate.edu/ctmh/publications/journal.html. There's no charge to receive the journal by mail. Simply contact us at avery.armstrong@txstate.edu with your address, and we'll be happy to put you on our list. You can connect via our Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube accounts as well.

Of course, we could not have done any of this without the hard work, advice, and financial contributions from all of our friends and supporters. This journal is a group effort of Alan Schaefer, Savannah Menchaca-Trujillo, Avery Armstrong, and myself. We also offer our sincerest thanks to Gary Hartman, Adam Clark, Tammy Gonzales, John McKiernan-Gonzalez, Jeff Helgeson, Mary Brennan, Gregg Andrews, Thom Lemmons, Madelyn Patlan, Roberta Ruiz, Twister Marquiss, Hector Saldaña, Katie Salzmann, Clay Shorkey, Molly Hulst, and the Center's Advisory Board. And thanks to all of you who remain invested in the study, preservation, and celebration of Texas music history.

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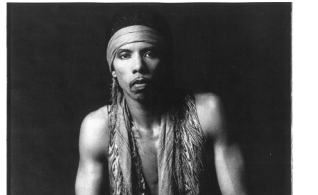
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In order to continue this success, we need your help. Your contribution will help fund publication of *The Journal of Texas*

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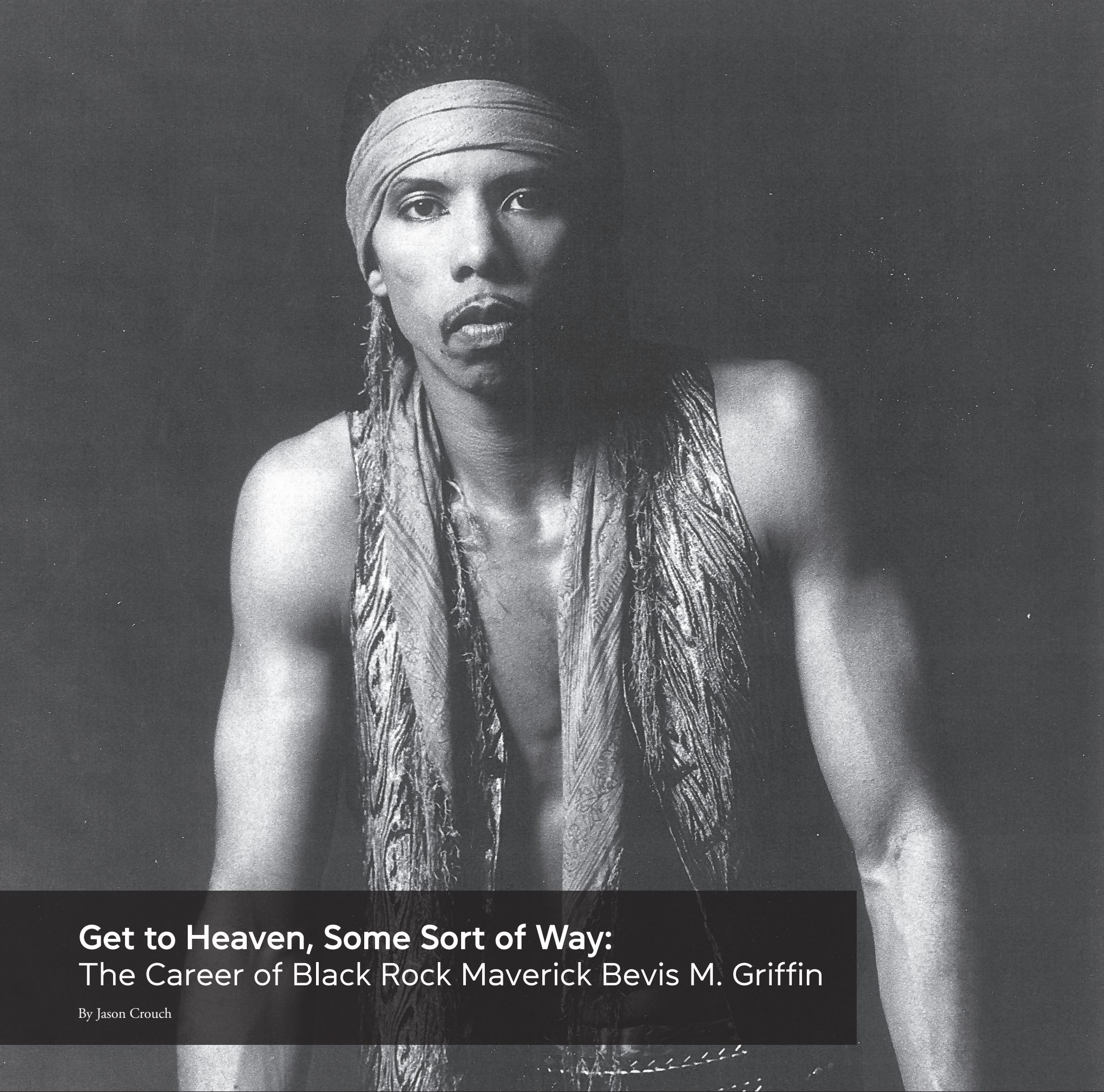
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Get to Heaven, Some Sort of Way: The Career of Black Rock Maverick Bevis M. Griffin

By Jason Crouch

He is among the most seasoned of Austin veterans, eyewitness to every relevant musical pivot in the “Live Music Capitol of the World” for a half century, and a consistent musical provocateur and instigator in a town that thrives on such notions.

He laughs when he tells a story. A big, wide grin and eyes like slits. He speaks with his hands. He still marvels, as if he can't believe these remarkable things actually happened to him. He will liberally recite lyrics from famed rock and roll standards to prove a point. But just as frequently he spins very quotable, improvisational statements. When prompted about something from the deep past, something he has not pondered in years, something that was costly emotionally, he looks to the side, summoning memories, things, and people that only he can see. His mind's eye peers into that place only he can touch. Once in a very great while, recollections turn to an instance when he felt slighted by trusted associates or was provoked. His demeanor hardens. The dark cloud descends. He says, “People forget I'm from South Central LA. There's not a soft bone in my body. I've had to do soul searching to wrestle that demon that would make me volatile or threatening.” But like Texas weather, the cloud rapidly dissipates and the sunshine returns in force. It is most often sunny. And fun.

The life story of Bevis Griffin could be told from any number of worthwhile, historical angles: the story of the Second Great Migration when African American families journeyed to the West Coast from the Deep South to seek a new life and opportunities; the story of Los Angeles before and during the Watts Riots in 1965; or the family life of Black Texans on the eve of desegregation in Texas, specifically in Wichita Falls. But the most common theme that runs through the life of Bevis Griffin is music. The allure of song furnished his life's work and constant muse. In rapid succession Griffin went from fan, to working musician, to artist, to demoralized problem child, and then redeemed leader and educator, all to the march of his own drum. And to the beckoning of his own voice. Bevis has learned to reinvent himself in the face of challenge and despair, and sometimes, just because prevailing social winds had changed, the page had turned. Resilience is a hammer he swings mightily. From the onset, Bevis Griffin raged in the audience. He's been seated at the drum throne onstage and then migrated center stage, behind the mic. He's gone from drummer man to glam rocker, singer and soul shouter, herald of the Austin music scene, ground-floor participant in the Black Rock Coalition, and an



At the drums. Courtesy of Bevis Griffin.

intimate to Living Colour. He is among the most seasoned of Austin veterans, eyewitness to every relevant musical pivot in the “Live Music Capitol of the World” for a half century, and a consistent musical provocateur and instigator in a town that thrives on such notions.

Born on April 26, 1953, in Los Angeles, California, Bevis Melvin Griffin was the first child of Melvin Mitchell Griffin and his wife Navaline (née Tunsil). Both parents were transplants from southern states, his father following older siblings to California, his mother the oldest child in her family. Father Melvin was the youngest of eleven and had left Natchez, Mississippi, as the United States was swept into World War II. His mother’s roots were in Texas. “Contrary to popular belief, South Central was a kind of serene, beautiful community before the Watts Riots,” he declares. “Especially from a childhood perspective.” He recalls happy memories of playing on tree-lined streets with neighborhood children chasing street vendors that offered fresh produce from nearby farms and locally baked donuts from a mobile van that snaked the residential blocks. Melvin had initially hoped to become a mechanic but found that acquiring a barber license took only half the time required for mechanical certification. He opened a barbershop at 54th Street and Broadway. This location

was advantageously located around the corner from a famed musical destination, the 5-4 Ballroom. “The 5-4 Ballroom is to South-Central Los Angeles what the Apollo Theater is to Harlem,” said one time owner Margie Evans. Constructed in 1922, the building initially catered to white Angelenos attending big band performances.

But as local demographics began shifting, Black performers were booked to play for a burgeoning Black middle class. The stars who appeared for Black Angelenos is a who’s who list of American song: Nat King Cole, Muddy Waters, James Brown, Duke Ellington, B.B. King, Dinah Washington, Ray Charles, and Otis Redding, to name just a few. The barbershop flourished and clientele regularly included touring luminaries needing a haircut and shave to be performance ready. As Bevis recounts, “The barbershop was a huge success, not just because [my father] was a great barber . . . but he was a hustler with an afterhours gambling enterprise that attracted the musicians after completing their sets. They would enter through a back door and shoot dice and play cards.” Some of Bevis’s earliest memories occurred in this setting. Before entering school, his days would be spent at his father’s workplace. “The barbershop was my day care! Which was awesome. He had a jukebox, a television, and this rolling cast of characters that would be floating in and out of the shop all day like a sitcom!” He laughs. “That’s where Ike Turner gave me the nickname of Jitterbug! Kids always like having nicknames. But my dad instilled in me the idea of presenting yourself well. Not just matters of hygiene, but being aware of how people see you. He did not curse or swear liberally. He said to me, ‘If you present yourself as a gentleman, then everybody else is kind of forced to follow suit.’”

At home, his mother Navaline played records much more than the television, with Sundays geared towards gospel singers such as Mahalia Jackson and Clara Ward. She enjoyed jazz stylists such as Ella Fitzgerald and Dinah Washington. He describes his mother as sophisticated and very pretty. “My mother had this very beautiful presence and poise. My grandmother Roxy (Roxanne Clark) was a very beautiful woman too, with a degree of Native American influence in her DNA. She had a sculptured and beautiful face . . . the cheekbones, the structures. All my aunts were beautiful.” Navaline had traveled to Southern California to study criminology at Los Angeles City College when she met Melvin. His mother’s sister Baby Frances was a lifelong teacher and taught Bevis how to read before he went to school, and thus he skipped first grade. “I never had anxiety instilled in me by my parents about playing with Asian children or Mexican

children, and our neighborhood was very diverse. They never told me I couldn’t trust white people. I didn’t become aware of the conflagration that was the Civil Rights Movement until 1962 or ’63 [when] you started seeing things flaring up in Birmingham on TV. You’ve never seen people sic dogs or turning hoses on people in your neighborhood! That’s like another planet! You’re only young but you know that’s not right.” He stares off in thought.

Soon thereafter, the Watts Riots flared in 1965. “I was coming home from middle school when the riots erupted. I remember because I was crossing this really broad street called Central Avenue that ran as a major artery through South Central. I remember looking farther south and there was this huge cloud of black smoke. Our instinct was to go see what’s on fire, but it was more than the ten blocks we initially guessed. I went home to turn on the afternoon cartoons and it was all [coverage] about the riots. We couldn’t believe it. It was like a Godzilla movie. It was thrilling for a kid. But as the thing progressed . . . it was getting closer to our neighborhood like a wildfire. An urban wildfire. An aura of chaos. That’s when the looting started, when the sun set. Total anarchy went into overdrive. It rolled all the way up to 51st Street where my dad’s barbershop was. He had to spray paint ‘soul brother’ on his windows as if that was going to be an invisible forcefield. And in some cases, it might have spared a broken window and in some cases, it made no difference whatsoever. It was roiling out of control! After the second or third day, the reality started to settle in. There’s no grocery store to go to, no drug store to go to, no laundromat. A week after the riot was quelled, it literally was like a horror show, because everything was scorched earth, at least in the business district. It wasn’t the houses, thank God. And that’s what was so bizarre. You had all these nice little neighborhoods, and you go three blocks and it’s like a warzone.” He continues, “The riot definitely affected my dad’s business and there was a degree of PTSD and anxiety that beset everybody in the neighborhood. Shortly thereafter my dad’s mental health started to suffer. One thing led to another, exacerbating bad energy in the marriage. When he and my mother decided to separate, that was in 1966 going into ’67. My mother filed for divorce and decided to [return] to Wichita Falls to reset her life plan. I was going to stay behind with my dad, but he was diagnosed with tuberculosis. He was remanded by court order to a sanatorium for quarantine treatment. My mother said she would really need my help [with] sisters Stephanie (a.k.a. Boo) and Roslyn Jill, and baby brother Bob. [She said,] ‘I’ll help you get a drum set.’ That was like a magic lure,” he beams.

Navaline’s extended family members were paragons of the Black community in Wichita Falls. His grandmother’s brother Uncle Henry Clark and his wife Big Frances were intrinsically involved with wealthy white families as trusted and long-serving domestic workers. Uncle H.C. was a deacon in the church and an executive at the Masonic Lodge. Bevis’s parents had represented the mid-century esthetic in Los Angeles. “When you see the *Dick Van Dyke Show*, that’s what my house looked like in California. But these [family members] were on another level completely. Their house was a showcase! Impeccably tasteful with Italian and French furniture. When you were in the house, you had to keep your hands to yourself. There was no gambling money flowing through their economy.” His grandmother Roxy’s family had immigrated from the Hempstead, Texas, area. “She was a pistol! Not soft spoken, she had her opinions. She was literate, had been a teacher, and was adamant about education. All her girls had gone to school. And that is part of my DNA, too.” Living with his mother, grandmother, and two little sisters greatly enlightened him as a young man and offered him “a deep dive into the female esthetic. You’re listening to women talk to women,” and they did not mince words about men. H.C. filled the role of the father figure. “He was sober, he didn’t drink, he didn’t gamble, he went to church, you understand what I’m saying? He never raised his voice to his wife. He was completely respected in that community. My aunt and uncle were property owners. They took care of business and cared for those in the community. Church was a prerequisite in the Black community. I [did go] to church in LA.” But the liturgical schedule in Texas was a tad more intense. “I loved going to church because of the singing, because of the spectacle of the whole thing. The main thing was if you were at church you were getting in alignment with your ability to basically get to heaven, some sort of way. At least you got a ticket.”



Bevis Griffin and Family. Courtesy of Bevis Griffin.

Wichita Falls was segregated, indeed separated by a cliché railroad track. Bevis initially prospered at an all-Black high school, participating in track and field and some gymnastics. “But I found my niche in the art room. The art kids were an elite little clique. I really started getting into the artwork on the album covers of records. I was into this secret world of discovery of the rock and pop music of the day. I was the only kid in my class that was into [Cream’s] *Disraeli Gears* and Steppenwolf. Wichita Falls finally got an FM station, and I heard [Frank Zappa’s] *Mothers of Invention* and Captain Beefheart. I eventually started working there. I had a little graveyard shift on the weekends. I started playing Funkadelic records. Sometimes I just played stuff because I liked the album cover,” he laughs. Griffin also collaborated with Billy Jones, a local music enthusiast and facilitator. “I cut my teeth with Billy Jones. He turned me onto [Miles Davis’s] *Bitches Brew*. He had a very sophisticated palette and got you listening to things you never would have heard about otherwise.” Jones, a Vietnam veteran, recorded everything on reel to reel, documenting sessions with in-town players he handpicked.

band, bassist Tommy Shannon and drummer “Uncle” John Turner. Of particular note was a new regional power trio called ZZ Top. They were still pulling a trailer but were sonically overwhelming. “That’s like a whale in your front yard!” Bevis and Jimmy were invited to an afterhours jam where ZZ Top played an additional set for a select audience.

“One of my classmates was Steve Nunn, whose older brother was Gary P. Nunn, who I didn’t know then. Steve and I were friendly. He said, ‘I’m going down to Austin to see my brother this weekend. You wanna come along?’ Any opportunity to get out of town, I’m not gonna pass up on it! So we drive down to Austin in his VW Van. We were just on Gary P’s coattails for 48 hours. We were up for two days straight! I took acid for the first time. I was in a recording studio for the first time. It was literally like the analogy of *The Wizard of Oz*, going from sepia tone to Technicolor, it was that drastic. The local color of Austin in 1970 was so vibrant. All these people with long hair everywhere and girls in tank tops. Everyone was free. Especially compared to Wichita Falls! Austin had cultivated

Of particular note was a new regional power trio called ZZ Top. They were still pulling a trailer but were sonically overwhelming. “That’s like a whale in your front yard!” Bevis and Jimmy were invited to an afterhours jam where ZZ Top played an additional set for a select audience.

These opportunities provided Griffin with his first taste of recording, albeit in a most primitive fashion.

Then-area superintendents closed the Black high school in 1969. Black students were bussed to area schools in the name of desegregation. “I was still sixteen and did summer school. I was banging around Wichita Falls jam sessions. I was proficient enough to play with Jimmy Saurage and his band Franklin’s Mast. We had art classes together.” Guitarist Jimmy Saurage arrived in Wichita Falls courtesy of his parents’ Air Force careers. “There were only five bands maybe in the town. Jimmy had a graphic skill set and was always postering, making posters. Hanging them around town.” Bevis and Jimmy would see touring bands at the local teen club, the Kickapoo Kantico, particularly Krackerjack, a five-piece Texas powerhouse with a rotating roster of esteemed guitarists and the recently dismissed rhythm section for Johnny Winter’s

this movement and it was in full swing. I got to dip my toe in the Vulcan Gas Company. I saw Checkered Flag, New Orleans Club, the Black Queen. I went to all these spots. I had a big Afro and scarves on my arms like Jimi and jewelry hanging off my neck like Sly. My hair was my pass, you know what I mean!?”

“After I graduated high school, I go back to LA ostensibly to begin college. My parents were divorced and my dad was out of the sanitorium. I was going to pursue in earnest an education towards architecture. I was a good student, I had good grades, I liked school. But the genie was already out of the bottle. Then I discovered *Rolling Stone* magazine, *Creem* magazine, and in LA all this stuff is wide open. It made Austin look like Waco,” he chuckles. “Before I finished my first semester, my dad got a phone call from a friend that



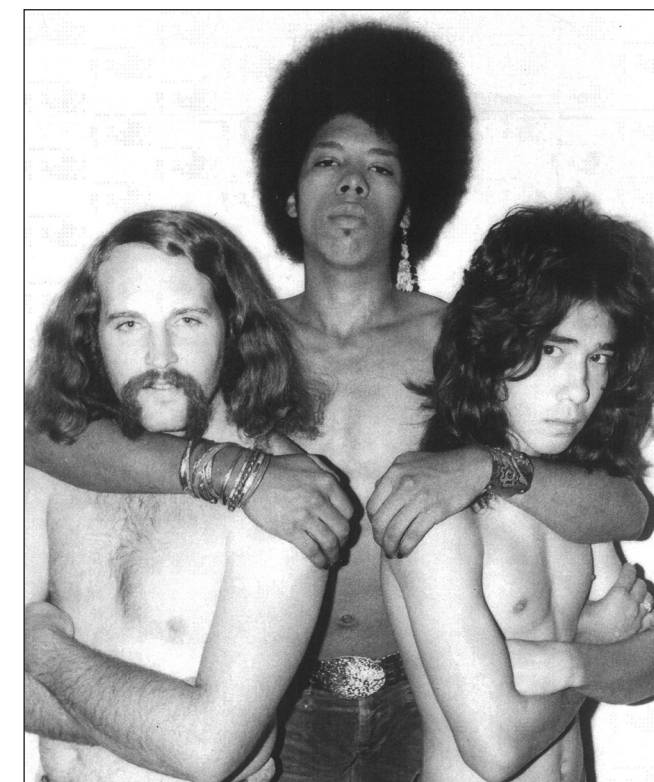
Bevis Griffin and Tommy Shannon. New York, 1983. Courtesy of Bevis Griffin.

had a blues group, and they were going to go out on tour to support O.V. Wright. I told dad, ‘I’d like to take that gig just to see how it goes. Just to see what it’s really like.’ And I did. I auditioned at the 5-4 Ballroom and played my first gig there. The band leader was this cat called Alabama Slim, who I ultimately found out was an inveterate gambler and pimp and had all sorts of salacious sidebar activities. This cat was about 6’ 3”, sharp dresser, fast talker. Had a Fleetwood El Dorado that we traveled in pulling a trailer. We supported Rudy Ray Moore and Jimmy Lynch the Funky Tramp. We were out for maybe four months until the tail end of fall. Then we stay put, here and there for a few weeks. No contracts, no formalities. I’m seventeen, I’m on the road, I’m traveling, learning my trade, watching other performers, the seminal experience of being a touring musician. It wasn’t glamorous. In late November, Slim disappears in Akron, Ohio. Stranded . . . indefinitely. I was antsy. I called my mom. I asked her what I should do. She says, ‘What you can do is call your friend Jimmy Saurage, because he’s been calling here for you almost every other day!’ I thought, ‘Really?’ ‘Here’s his number. Call him and then call me back.’ He was living in Austin and needed another drummer for Franklin’s Mast. I said, ‘If you got fifty bucks for a bus ticket, send it Western Union. I can put my drums on the freight and be there in three or four days, because I’m in freakin’ Akron.’ The decision was made and back to Texas I go.”

After arriving in Austin, Jimmy and Bevis started woodshedding at a storage facility off Riverside Drive. They lived in the storage room for weeks at a time, scavenging at a gas station, and utilizing the “facilities” at a nearby Dairy Queen. The upstarts set their aspirations on a pending battle

of the bands including some of the premiere local rock acts in Austin of the day, and featuring the absolute top of the food chain at that time: Krackerjack. “At the time I first got here as a teenager, Krackerjack was in full bloom. They were the kings of the scene. And Krackerjack looked like a big rock band, they just had the aura. They were packing every venue that they played at. Even weeknights!” Griffin and Saurage had encountered Krackerjack previously in Wichita Falls, even hanging out backstage to meet the band members. Refreshing the memory of bassist Tommy Shannon of his existence, Griffin still glorifies the connection decades later. “Tommy Shannon I always credit as one of my first mentors, as far as the local scene.” Another challenging band on the bill at that cherished gig included Cottonmouth with Van Wilks.

Franklin’s Mast impressed the assembled audience, doing a set heavy on original material in the style of Grand Funk Railroad. “Our performance energy was what generated attention for us, because the others were like shoegazers, kinda like the Allman Bros. Well, Jimmy looked like Jimmy Page, played a Les Paul down around his knees. He had so much charisma with his theater background. Jimmy was the animated spectacle. That’s the kind of thing that put us on the map. I looked like a little hybrid of Jimi and Sly with my big



Franklin’s Mast. Barry Minnick, Bevis Griffin, Jimmy Lee Saurage. Courtesy of the Texas Music Museum.

hair. I wasn't tippy-toeing around on those drums. Our bass player was this guy Barry Minnick. He was good looking and competent. We were just bangers! All this caught the attention of Charlie Hatchett, the vanguard booking agent in Central Texas. He was there and gave us his card. That following Monday we said, 'We're in!' He had us going out and about southeast Texas and west Texas. All these weird shows, sorority dances, sock hops, high school things. Then we got invitations to play real clubs in Houston, San Antonio, and San Angelo. San Angelo became a real hub for us. For some reason we caught fire in west Texas. Midland, Odessa. They just couldn't get enough of Franklin's Mast in west Texas. Almost every time we went out there, we had some kind of controversy of police harassing us, dismantling our trailer. Our saving grace was Charlie Hatchett, an attorney with a private plane. He would come out and spring us. The only experiences of racism exerted on us were as a band in traveling scenarios. And because we had such an androgynous appearance, we got charged with all kinds of crazy things. Lewd and lascivious behavior, impersonating a woman. I didn't even know that was a thing. In towns like Kingsville and Beeville, we were the weekend attraction. All the Austin bands would do this kind of thing. We lived in that van."

"By the spring of '71, we had moved into a motel around 58th and Lamar. Mother Earth on Lamar was our hang. That was where a lot of the hard rock was happening. It had an artistic aura about it, lighted dance floor. That was our ecosystem. Then I was rolling with the Krackerjack posse. I just went wherever they went. I cannot overstate how influential they were on the city, on the scene. That's when I was developing my sensibility about what is hip, what is cool. In the process getting deep, firsthand knowledge from



Franklin's Mast. Courtesy of Bevis Griffin.

seasoned vets. These guys were doing this when I was still in junior high school. Me hanging out with Krackerjack was no different than hanging with the Hell's Angels. They were on the other side of the social fence. We were like vampires, up for days. Zero 'fucks' given about conformity."

"Krackerjack invited me to sit in. They were giving me a leg up, ya know? When that did happen, it opened the flood gates for me, it put a patina on my skill set. I had invitations to do [studio] sessions. As a drummer, I tried to stay as versatile as possible."

Bevis waxes nostalgic over the scene in those years. "Everyone was so self-expressive. Everyone was shining in their own way. It was not just jeans, t-shirt, and flip-flops. This was not a costume; it was a uniform. Then as the British glam explosion is making its way state side, Slade finally comes to the Armadillo World Headquarters. And everyone who is on that team, the UK glam tip, is there and there's maybe twelve of us. How's that different than the nascent punk scene? Not at all, it's the same!" The eye-catching garb was deeply, personally relevant, but not obviously revelatory to outsiders. "I will go so far to say there is a certain degree of homoeroticism in the zeitgeist of that [musical movement]. But not in an overt way, we weren't kissing each other, but it was something fraternal about it. Like we were a certain type of dude that other dudes couldn't relate to. We weren't raising eyebrows if someone put eyeliner on. We were more like, 'How much should we put on? Should we put more?' There were other counterparts in Dallas like the Werewolves, or a band called Bees Make Honey in San Antonio."

"I was never ostracized by racism from the [local] players. I never had an anxiety about being a Black glam rocker. I was challenging as much homophobia as racism, maybe more so. I had to fight for my right to self-expression. When the glam thing took off, just certain individuals said, 'That's for me!'" Of a trip to Dallas to see bosom compatriots the Werewolves open for the New York Dolls, Bevis explains, "I can't say that I was infatuated with the [Dolls] musically, as much as I was esthetically. Because they had everyone's hair on end. I thought, 'That shit looks cool to me!' It was like playing with Barbie dolls, and I'm the doll! I had a twenty-seven-inch waist, so I could wear any girl clothes. I was tall, thin, with snake hips, ya know? And girls loved to dress me! I'd come to their crib, and they'd say, 'Try this on. Try that!' And I could sew! (pauses, smiling) In a rudimentary way."

But as the years turned, Franklin's Mast began to stagnate. "We had an agent but never a manager. I regret that now. We

lapsed into this complacency of codependency. We should have been managing our own expectations and opportunities. We should have packed up and moved to New York like the Werewolves. . . . But even if we're stuck on the hamster wheel here, it's a hamster wheel we made. I was younger than most of the local [talent]. When I came on the scene, I was barely eighteen. As I came up the ranks, between '72 and '75, I'm only like twenty-one. Now I'm four years deep in the game." Austin had no built-in record label presence then (and still does not). But the eyes of a particular scene did garnish international excitement. "Then came the culmination of Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings and the whole cosmic cowboy thing." This is one of the few monumental musical movements of the period in which Bevis had no direct participation, although he saw some performances.

Bevis returned to Wichita Falls to regroup his faculties. "My mom and dad remarried. I got to be part of the family again. Between '75 and '77, I did a lot of soul searching and needed to elevate my drumming. I took a lot of sideman gigs. Go out on the road for a few weeks at a time. Around '78, it became clear to me there was a new musical movement. Before I heard the Sex Pistols, I heard the Stranglers. I started looking at all these British trade papers. That's where I read about the Ramones in '76. I went one summer to see the Werewolves in NYC. They were signed to RCA and were managed by (former Rolling Stones manager) Andrew Loog Oldham. Kicking around New York before the punk scene really came into vogue, I thought, 'There's nothing going on here that I can't do.' I almost thought they were kind of lazy. And while I was there, I met Phil Lynott (the Black Irish singer-bassist of Thin Lizzy) at the Chelsea Hotel, and we had a conversation. He said something to the effect that, 'In England, everything is predicated on the church of what's happening right now. Like, if you're not early, you're late. You really want to fixate on becoming something that is unique. That way you'll never date yourself. Don't get into a headspace where you're trying to be hip.' You'd think that I would've thought of this myself. So, was I going to become a drummer that was amorphous, playing with any old opportunity that came up? Or do I take the next step and become an artist that will be self-determined? That happened between '78 and '79. I'm looking at the clock, man, because now I'm 27. That's the age when Jimi and Brian Jones died. So, I've got nothing to lose. I figure I'm going into the Bevis Griffin business."

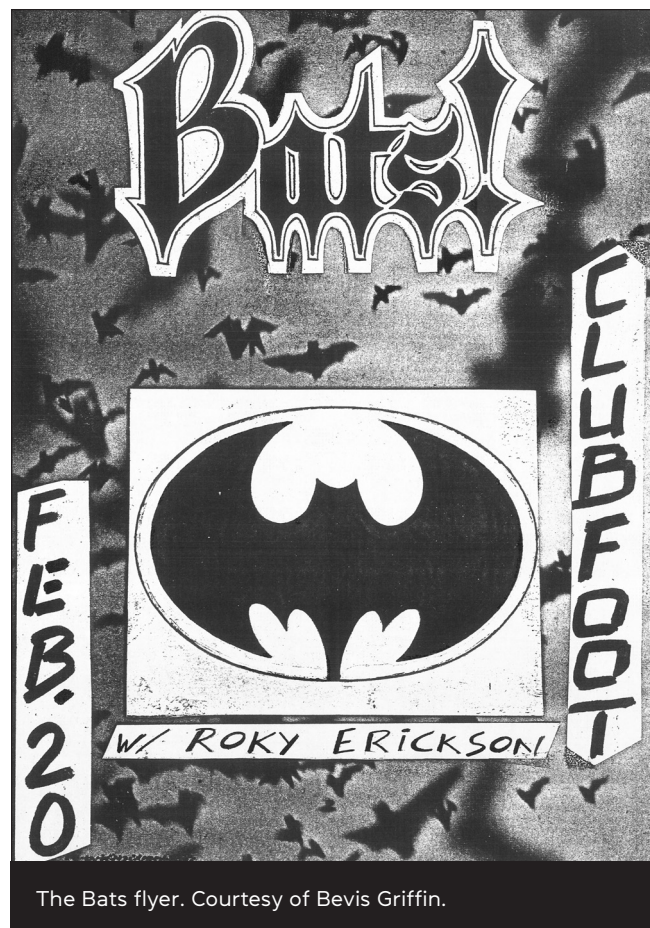
Franklin's Mast gained a new bass player with Jimmy Fleming from Blackbird, a band that featured a teenaged Stevie Ray Vaughan. Fleming brought "another level of high



Skyscrapers, 1979. From top C. K. Bailey, Bevis Griffin, Byron Davies, Jimmie Lee Saurage. Courtesy of the Texas Music Museum.

energy to the live performance. Now Jimmy had a great foil onstage. We really started to get popular in Oklahoma and Kansas. I guess an extension of Hatchett's circuit. We had a big following in Oklahoma City at a huge strip club called the Red Dog Saloon. Whatever those Mötley Crüe songs are talking about? That's the way we were living. Full bacchanalia! We almost moved to Oklahoma City." As one of the two lead singers in Franklin's Mast, Bevis was singing Trapeze songs, Free songs, and even "Black Dog" by Led Zeppelin.

In the summer of 1978 Bevis went to famed Austin venue Raul's to attend a Bodysnatchers show and met guitarist Chris Bailey, with whom he would collaborate for years. "We had an interesting amalgam of guilty pleasures. We both liked Black Sabbath, we both liked Parliament/Funkadelic, Motorhead. He turned me onto Devo. He was a really consistent songwriter. That's when the lightbulb came on! Jimmy Saurage said, 'We should start this new band.' I had met Chris Bailey. Chris knew [bassist] Byron 'Bucky' Davies. The whole thing was built on magnetic attraction. You read these cues and check the boxes. We started rehearsing. Bucky



The Bats flyer. Courtesy of Bevis Griffin.

knew Kathy Valentine and Carla Olson from the Violators, who had just started up.” The inaugural punk rock scene at Raul’s was initiating tremendous attention. “Once I fell in with Chris and Jimmy, we formed the band Skyscrapers. Chris was writing songs and singing some, I was singing some, but Jimmy was the predominant front man. It was like the Cars, but no keyboards. It was a fresh sound, sonically progressive, very hooky. That’s what was going on where new wave and punk diverged. New wave gained a stronger presence, not just in the marketplace but in the zeitgeist at large. Because that whole LA new wave scene was where the Go-Gos and the Motels evolved out of. That’s where Gary Myrick and the Figures evolved out of. We were cognizant of all that. Chris had sophisticated, chordal structure, and a great sense of melodic counterpoint. An A-class composer. He was like our Swiss army knife. When you pair that with someone with great fundamentals like Jimmy Saurage, who was a front man like Chris wasn’t, you’ve got a great combo. Bucky Davies was a chick magnet, he looked like a celebrity. Had a great, funny personality, a lot of fun! So, Skyscrapers were born, and we started making the rounds. First show at Raul’s (he believes).

But we had much more stability at the Continental Club, which was just coming out of mothballs. It had been dormant for almost a decade. Roger ‘One Knite’ Collins and Wayne Nagel were joint partners. Wayne always had his finger on the pulse of what’s going on. Wayne had his stable of acts he liked. He just kept [booking] us in repeat cycles. Before long, the folks at the Armadillo caught wind of us. First time we played there we opened for Jools and the Polar Bears. We went over because we were a lot more exciting than Jools,” he laughs. “The next time we played there we opened for the Ramones! That was awesome! Then Jimmy felt conflicted when Chris and I started writing songs together. We were on the same wavelength. It was nothing contrived about it. Chris and I got into a groove.” Saurage felt left out and after almost a decade of working together, broke off from performing with Griffin and the other Skyscrapers. “He appreciated [my] ambition at first. . . . But I owe him for breaking the ice on my career for as naïve and difficult as I was and forceful about how I wanted to contribute. I had a sensibility early on that presaged my actual abilities. I knew what I liked.” Bevis and Bailey served a stint with the Shades, but a change was afoot and an opportunity from out of state arose.

In 1979, after networking with some Oklahoma musicians, Bevis accepted an invitation from band leader Bob Avila of Altus, Oklahoma. He had a lucrative schedule touring Air Force bases around the west. “I went up to Altus and had Jimmy Fleming come along, rehearsing with this outfit, cutting my teeth as lead singer without blowing my cover. On the downlow. These guys were playing southern rock, but I couldn’t do just that. So, I had to show ‘em these records. ‘This is Aerosmith, this is Bad Company, this is Nazareth, we’re gonna play this and this.’ Now we had twelve songs of scorching hard rock for this cover band. ‘This is Mountain, this is Cactus.’ Going all the way back to the early ’70s. I cherry-picked this set and instructed, ‘This is the way we’re gonna dress.’ I was the stylist. Some of these guys were roofers and laborers. I took ‘em *way* out of their comfort zones. And my hair, it looked like Steve Stevens’s hair. We were called Dirty Tricks.” After a successful run of shows, Bevis returned to Wichita Falls for Christmas, and then to Austin, having recreated himself as a front man. “I was copping this from James Brown, copping that from Freddie Mercury or Rod Stewart. I was providing a *show!* And this was all before I saw Van Halen. After that, I knew I was on the right track!”

With the new-found capacity to sing and front a band, Griffin and Bailey formed the Bats. This was long before tourists would gather nightly to see the current local

phenomenon of Mexican freetail bats that were then establishing a colony beneath the Congress Street Bridge. “Chris was very prolific. He was churning [songs] out week after week. I was more pragmatic. I sing my ideas and beat on the table like a beatbox. Work out the verses and make demos on cassette. It would rarely take more than an hour and you got a brand-new nugget. We had bass guitarist Courtney Audain fresh from Trinidad and drummer Billy Blackmon from the Skunks. Then drummer Johnny Medina. He had a basement rehearsal space in Travis Heights. When we became the Bats, we liked the punchy short name everyone could spell and remember. We shot a video right outside the Natural Bridge tourist stop outside San Antonio. We had a manager called Ron Backer. Chris was a great graphic artist, and this was the zenith of the Austin poster scene. And we had the support of the Continental [and performed with] Standing Waves and the Big Boys, the Next, Billy Pringle and the Boy Troubles, [who all] erupted out of Raul’s. Most with some stability or staying power. M.D.C. and the Dicks. I was empathetic to the new groups, some of who were kinda rickety. Punk was not a huge revelation, but what I found most appealing was the DIY aspect. You don’t have to wait around for Mr. Big to get things going. And I liked the political messaging. I liked Black Flag for that reason. I liked Jello Biafra, Circle Jerks, Minor Threat. I liked that whole revolutionary posture. This is all pre hip-hop. We were conscious of all these things. But at the same time, I’m trying to figure out how to get into the big leagues. All that [scene] is going on but I’m already hanging out with the Fabulous Thunderbirds and Joe Ely and Double Trouble. Because tick, tock, the clock is ticking. I’m only twenty-five, twenty-six, and I’m psychologically shifting gears, pushing further into songwriting and song presentation. A local band D-Day got signed to A&M Records. Their manager was Elise O’Leary and she got us in the recording studio at Third Coast Studio right on I-35. It was significant because it was a full-fledged soundstage. A big expensive space (owned by Michael Block). We cut six tracks inside two weeks and we come out with a strong demo. She gave us a release of the recording and Ron Backer started shopping it. Billy Gibbons somehow got a copy and invited me to a party at Pecan Street Recording Studio. He said he liked it. But months passed and nothing was happening. At the Continental I met an English engineer John Rollo fresh from Konk Studios (owned by the Kinks). He was trying to expatriate and had a Green Card or status to be in the United States to marry a Texan. He saw us at the Continental, and I gave him a tape. He said, ‘This is outstanding. How would you like to come out to a studio I’m building in Uvalde?’ It was called Indian Creek.”

“The Bats are a hard rocking outfit fronted by the irrepressible *Bevis Griffin...*”
(Austin American-Statesman—Dec. 81’)

“*They do everything right... Boston, Foreigner, gird your jugular, The Bats are out for blood—*”
(Third Coast Magazine—Dec. 81’)

“The Bats *create a vital and powerful dimension in Rock music with the accessibility for classic staying power—*”
(R.W.C. — Jan. 82’)

“The Bats *consciously aim to merge raw Rock power with cool humor and finesse... civilized but unsubdued.*”
(“Footprints” Austin Chronicle — Mar. 82’)

The Bats promotion. Courtesy of the Texas Music Museum.

Manager Ron Backer made sure the resulting tapes would be free of surprise clauses and that the band would retain all rights to the resulting material. “We recorded another six songs series with Rollo. It was a much higher caliber result. He had such sage experience working with Ray Davies. Then he moved to New York. His manager Betty Heusinger made some overtures towards the project. I had met her as the road manager for the Pretenders who we opened for in Houston on their first US tour. Then I found out there was a band called Bats out of New Zealand and they were getting press. I found out by reading *Melody Maker* or *New Music Express* magazine. So, we made a preemptive decision and changed the band name to avoid confusion in the marketplace. Chris came up with Banzai Kik. I liked that! It was strong and fresh. And there was a resurgence in heavy metal. Not just the New Wave of British Heavy Metal (Motorhead, Iron Maiden, Def Leppard, Girlschool, Saxon), but in LA all the stuff that came on the back end of the Van Halen success, you know Mötley

Crüe and all that. This was all anathema to the lion's share of the Austin scene. That was polarizing! All these Austin bands here were getting comfortable in their new wave/punk rock niche. We decided to turn the corner and go back to the arena sound. Hard rock! With immense authority! And joyful impunity! It alienated us from Raul's and Continental Club. Our new base camp was Club Foot run by Brad First. A new scene would culminate there with more road shows. That's where the Plasmatics, R.E.M., and Grace Jones came to play. The Stranglers, the BusBoys. U2 played in Austin for the first time at Club Foot."

In the vacuum of the closing of the Armadillo, Club Foot and Austin Opera House took off. "That's where a lot of energy migrated after the Armadillo. When AC/DC played the Opera House, it was shoulder to shoulder. Judas Priest, Gary Numan, Lou Reed, Roger Troutman and Zapp, the Tubes. Ike and Tina Turner were some of the first to play the Opera House. Once I spent the whole day with Ian Hunter

to a brain tumor. At a show featuring Banzai Kik and the Werewolves at Club Foot, Little Steven Van Zant showed up, escorted by local blues shouter and Banzai Kik fan Lou Ann Barton. Van Zant was impressed and offered Griffin an open invitation to collaborate if he found himself in New York. "He told me, 'What you're doing would be a great thing in New York. People would really dig it!' He then invited us to open his next show in Houston the following Saturday and in Shreveport. We exchanged phone numbers and that lit the fuse in me to make the next step. It's 1983. If this thing is gonna move forward, then I need to get to New York, LA, or London!"

"So, I moved [to New York City] with a girlfriend and took up a lease from our friends in Standing Waves. They had moved to New York and were facing an imminent eviction from a location that we took over. It was in Hell's Kitchen, at 46th Street. That's Midtown. I stopped off in Wichita Falls and moved up to New York City in November of '83. The

One day the marquee says 'Stevie Ray Vaughan and Double Trouble.' I go over on my lunch break and see if the soundcheck is going. I asked the doorman if Stevie or Chris was right there. Sure enough, Chris Layton comes out and says, 'Come on in, man!' The rest is history.

and Mick Ronson in July '79. They were playing at the Austin Opera House. They were doing an in-store at Zebra Records. I had all my shit on. Me and Ian Hunter really hit it off! Ian said, 'I like this kid, Bevis!' The film *Roadie* was shot at the Opera House. They paid us \$50 each day to be extras for the film for days at a time. I hung out with Don Cornelius! Banzai Kik started getting bursts of press. *Texas Monthly* made some comments. The *Austin Chronicle* had yet to develop any cache. We were nominated for best hard rock band in the local press. Margaret Moser was a good friend of mine. I met her backstage at the Armadillo at an Iggy Pop show. In fact, Iggy was walking by and then turned around and stopped and licked the side of my face. We had a big laugh about that. But I wasn't really focused on the scene here. And I never really pandered to the *Chronicle*."

About this time, the Werewolves had returned to Texas after their New York residency, bereft of their contract with RCA and minus guitarist Seab Meador who had succumbed

following year in '84, I found a couple jobs in telemarketing. Then I got an opportunity to enroll at NYU on a first-level recording engineer program that gave me access to technical instruction that could lead to an interim certificate to pursue an internship at a major studio. I discovered that Little Steven and John Rollo were working together. That sounded very promising! But before we could get a session together, Little Steven was summoned by Bruce Springsteen in May 1984 to help complete *Born in the USA*. A case of right key, wrong keyhole. But I was already there and acclimating. Trying to make some progress, by hook or crook."

The immersion into the Big Apple was invigorating and exhausting. "New York has such a high social energy! Once you were in the slipstream of it, if you kept spinning the wheel, and you went out enough, you'd eventually come across all these people because it was like being in a blender. You lose

the awkwardness during celebrity encounters because you're just in a neutral space. I'm in a gallery with Christopher Reeve. I'm walking down the street, here comes Isaac Hayes. It was getting ridiculous. I'd see Andy Warhol at the fruit stand. Ed Bradley, Debbi Allen, Carly Simon, there's Bill Graham and Carlos Santana. I had a job at a call center by Sherman Park in proximity to the Beacon Theater. One day the marquee says 'Stevie Ray Vaughan and Double Trouble.' I go over on my lunch break and see if the soundcheck is going. I asked the doorman if Stevie or Chris was right there. Sure enough, Chris Layton comes out and says, 'Come on in, man!' The rest is history. I came back later that night and hung out in the green room. Mick Jagger had just left! All these people were waiting to get in, [MTV VJ] Mark Goodman, and all these other people. They were like, 'Who's this guy getting in before us?'

"I started hanging out at the little bistro on West Eighth Street called Be-Bop Café. It was directly across from Electric Lady Studios. It was a high-caliber musicians' hangout. And a lot of actors and theater people. It had some exclusive rooms in the back, you know, red velvet rope stuff. I knew the DJ and he started playing my demo with a song called "Noisy Music." A few people started asking about it. Then I met this Texan, Tim Hatfield, the lead technician of Mediasound Studios on 57th Street. That's like a cathedral, heavy traffic for high profile recording artists. I hit it off with Tim. He listened to my demo and asked, 'You did this? I'd like to form a production company with you to take these songs to another level.'" Hatfield began introducing Bevis to movers and shakers in the industry. Especially, top-level hard rock manager and agents from then-Aerosmith reps Leber-Krebs and attorney Judy Glover, former wife of Roger Glover of Deep Purple and Rainbow. "She was currently representing Jon Waite, who is working with my friend Gary Myrick and she's offering me a management contract! She took me to all these exclusive New York clubs like Nell's and Aria and Palladium, even soirees for Jimmy Page and Paul Rodgers when they formed the Firm or a party for David Bowie. She gets me a line of credit for \$25,000 so I can draft money for ancillary expenses. I used that mostly to fly Chris Bailey every weekend to New York to do recording. Judy is confident that we're gonna get a [record] deal. Then as '85 turns to '86, Judy comes back with a cancer diagnosis. That removed her from the equation. But because our relationship is congenial, she gave me a waiver to continue. I would honor a measure of entitlement and if I should hit it, I would reimburse her for her expenditures. But this was the '80s, the era of Bon Jovi and the Crüe. The budgets are enormous, six figures. We wouldn't feel like we got a deal unless it's for a quarter of a



Bevis Griffin and Stevie Ray Vaughan. New York, 1983. Courtesy of Bevis Griffin.

million. Maybe a \$500,000 advance. Everyone knows this could be a big money venture. Why? Because Michael Jackson and Prince are already at the top of the food chain. But there is no alternative to that in the hard rock medium. And that's because my image and my sound would prevent me from being perceived as a Prince tagalong. There were already Black superstars so it's not difficult to postulate how that could be impactful. Because I'm right in the vein of where Bon Jovi was coming from. I would sign the band as Chris Bailey and myself. We could make the record playing all the instruments ourselves. This is when we come into talks with Jack Douglas to produce."

Demos were recorded between '85 and '86, comprised of ever-emerging new material. Bevis was hitting the town with his girlfriend who was working at Ford Modeling Agency. The nightlife was ceaseless, the options for networking relentless. When reading the *Village Voice*, Bevis began noting regular contributor Greg Tate. One article in particular piqued his interest: "The Two Best Guitarists You Never Heard" detailing the stories, skills, and aspirations of Black guitarists Ronny Drayton and Vernon Reid. This was a fateful discovery for Bevis. Ronny Drayton was a seminal influence on much of the progressive Black music community in New York. He had a long association with avant-garde guitarist James Blood Ulmer. Vernon Reid at that time was most renowned for working with Ronald Shannon Jackson and the No Wave musical community in New York (and had yet to make connections with Mick Jagger that would result in his band Living Colour's multiplatinum debut *Vivid*). In the article Tate mentioned the Black Rock Coalition, a grassroots

movement meant to showcase Black artists in a wide array of musical idioms of NYC and beyond, but with an emphasis on rock. Excited by the notions posited in the article, Bevis impulsively phoned the *Village Voice* offices and asked to speak to Tate. Remarkably, he was patched through directly to the writer and immediately established a rapport. “I gave him my elevator pitch, started in Texas, been playing the hard rock since ’72, etc. And he said, ‘Man, Vernon is here right now. Would you like to talk to him?’ I talk to Vernon and he says, ‘Yeah. You sound like the kind of brother we need. We’re meeting down in Chinatown Saturday at 3:00.’ I make it to the meeting, it was small, maybe a dozen participants. But the speaker was Lester Bowie from the Art Ensemble of Chicago! And I think ‘Damn, that’s deep! These cats is deep!’ Lester spoke to ‘stepping outside the box,’ not having to fall into compliance with peer expectations. He suggested that ‘genre is not an important factor in any of your musical choices.’ So, I realized that this was an intellectual think tank, not just a social gathering. These cats were operating on a premise that

wasn’t a problem,” Bevis stresses. It was perceived as another musical movement: “Oh, that’s Black Rock?” In the fall of 1987, a run of BRC events took place around New York under the banner of the Black Rock Coalition Orchestra. “We put out a casting call. We needed more drummers, more guitarists. Everyone had to go out and bring a candidate back.”

By the next meeting the crowd had doubled, expanding exponentially by the time of the first performance at Prospect Park. “At one point I was going to play drums, but then we met Will Calhoun, who hadn’t joined Living Colour yet.” Players started falling into place. Some singers had bands, some did not. But a backline was provided with additional musicians on stand-by. “I was scheduled to do a couple of songs. My presentation caught a lot of buzz because I just did the Bevis Griffin type thing. We would play outdoors and then at a club like SOB’s or Peppermint Lounge, alternating between outside shows and clubs. We’d get a press blurb here and there. Then in February of 1987, we announced

We were all smushed up there. I can’t even remember what we were singing because by then I was lit! I just remember it being a love fest. I felt like I had found my family. After all this time being a solo maverick, I felt a part of a musical family. I had felt that to a smaller extent in Austin, but this was all Black musicians. All *great* Black musicians.

was really well formulated and they had a manifesto that Black artists have been driving the culture since . . . emancipation, so to speak! Analytically speaking, the whole [music industry] has been mechanized to distort the rock and roll bloodline, primarily for commercial purposes.”

At the close of the meeting, Vernon Reid asked Griffin, “Do you have any of your music with you?” Griffin confirmed and played a cassette sample of “Noisy Music.” “Everyone’s mouth just dropped open. I’ll never forget that! Everyone was aghast. We were going for the throat!” A crucial impression and valuable connection had been established. The BRC was in its infancy, having only met in person a handful of times. Griffin suggested taking the message to the stage in the form of a live musical presentation. Admission revenue could be folded back into the organization. Tate provided a platform via the *Village Voice* and like-minded area journalists in solidarity. “Publicity

a two-night festival at CBGB called ‘The Stalking Heads of ’87.’ It was blistering cold, in the 20s. We sold that thing out two nights in a row. We had such a large contingent of international press at these shows that within weeks we had a two-page article in *Rolling Stone* magazine.” Indeed, *Rolling Stone* columnist David Fricke recognized “the unabashed arena-style rockers Banzai Kik.” “Then *Billboard* and *Musician* magazine. This guy at *Creem* magazine was really dialed in on Banzai Kik! So, he wrote a little sidebar on us.” At the end was an all-star jam with luminaries from around the Black Rock scene: Nona Hendryx, Dr. Know, Michael Hampton, Bernard Fowler. “We were all smushed up there. I can’t even remember what we were singing because by then I was lit! I just remember it being a love fest. I felt like I had found my family. After all this time being a solo maverick, I felt a part of a musical family. I had felt that to a smaller extent in Austin, but this was all Black musicians. All *great* Black musicians.”

“All sorts of things were percolating. Living Colour got

the call from Epic Records. I got a cold call from this cat called Stan Schneider, says he’s an attorney and represents an executive at EMI Records, Ian Ralfini. He was trying to relaunch Shelter Records. He’d acquired the funding to bid on the Shelter roster to reissue on the new format of compact discs. Along with that he hoped to sign three new acts. Stan says he saw me at CBGB and was intrigued. He wanted to take a meeting. Ian signed Black Sabbath to Warner Brothers. He signed the Faces. Name-brand, heavyweight British bands. He listened to four songs including a song I wrote called “I Ain’t Keith Richards.” It was satirical, suggesting that you’ll kill yourself emulating Keith’s lifestyle. It wasn’t a joke song; it wasn’t like Weird Al [Yankovic].” Ralfini liked the song so much, he thought they should preview the number for his upstairs neighbor, Keith Richards. “He called and we went up in a private elevator to see Keith. He listened and said, ‘That’s pretty clever mate.’” He implied he would make a cameo in a video. “Just three years earlier, I came to town and didn’t know anybody, and then I was just hanging out at Keith Richard’s house. A real pinch-me moment! . . . So Ralfini offered me a retainer, wrote me a check to wait until he could close the deal on Shelter. The biggest check of my life then. I just gotta sit on my hands for these months.” Griffin was permitted to perform shows but was to not tender any other offers during the allotted time. “I took that check and went crazy at Trash & Vaudeville. I bought everything. I got my million-dollar look on! Every leather jacket. Every kind of boot in every color. When I was walking down the street, it was game time, even in New York! I was feeling my persona!”

But tragedy struck that Fourth of July of 1987, when in a heated argument Navaline fatally shot Melvin through the front door of their home with a shotgun. “There were instances of domestic violence in my house. Sporadic, but traumatic, nonetheless. But it wasn’t like my father was a monster. And my mother wasn’t a hyena. But there had been all these things underpinning with my dad’s gambling and his late nights. That brought a lot of stress to my mom. By the time they separated she had had it by ’66.” But Griffin’s parents had reunited, even remarrying in the 1970s, with Melvin moving to Wichita Falls while the three youngest children were still at home. “[In July 1987] I get this phone call, and it’s surreal. A neighbor had called my younger sister and she called me. It was a close-knit community. My mom would facilitate aid and assistance to the elderly neighbors. An argument had escalated from some minor disagreement. We all convened in Wichita Falls just to deal with the trauma as a family. I had an emotional ambivalence because I could have imagined so many other [scenarios.] ‘How could that have

been the best recourse? He was locked outside already. Why not wait for the cops to show up?’ The trauma was so intense because it was the last thing anybody expected to happen.” At the end of the summer, Griffin returned to New York, without having confessed the awful developments in Wichita Falls to any confidants in Austin, let alone in the Big Apple. “I kept that on complete lockdown!” Upon returning to New York, “Ian came back and said that the deal didn’t go through, for whatever reason, and I was free to go hunting for a deal.”

In autumn of 1987, Vernon Reid invited Griffin to see Bad Brains at the Ritz. Griffin had not yet seen the formidable all-Black punk unit from Washington DC. “The show went off and it was nuclear!” Bad Brains manager Anthony Countey was forming a production company and approached Griffin about a contract. “He took my tapes. He was really impressed with the material. Because of his clout with Bad Brains, I felt very confident in his ability to represent a Black alternative artist.” Countey’s partner was to be Andy Griggs who was already handling Michael Monroe fresh from the defunct Finnish hard rock band Hanoi Rocks. This proposed union would include publicist Lynn Robinson with additional outside help to negotiate any record label offers. Day-to-day management would fall to Griggs. Robinson had a long career as a publicist and regional radio music programmer for influential industry insider Lee Abrahms. The combined management team would go under the banner “Shake the Earth.” Robinson provided a four-song demo of Banzai Kik to her childhood friend and *Late Night with David Letterman* drummer Anton Fig who in turn passed the tape to noted record producer Jack Douglas. Douglas had made his name in the business producing Aerosmith and the New York Dolls and engineering sessions for John Lennon, the Who, and Cheap Trick. Douglas was impressed enough to ask to meet Griffin. The two hit it off with plans to meet at Studio Instrument Rentals (SIR) where “A-listers rehearse for auditorium shows. We set up as if we were playing a gig. Fortunately, I had been playing with these guys for over a year. We mapped out a six-song set together and let it blast. Jack Douglas told me, ‘This is it! You have the whole enchilada right here. Let’s cut the first sessions down at Chung King House of Metal.’”

Located in New York’s Chinatown, Chung King’s one-room studio had been popular with area punk bands, but it garnered an international profile hosting crucial early sessions for Run-D.M.C., Public Enemy, the Beastie Boys, and L.L. Cool J. “I was intrigued because of the Run-D.M.C. connection. But



Whoopi Goldberg and Bevis Griffin. Courtesy of Bevis Griffin.

when I get to the joint, it's kind of a dump. I'm just being real. But there had to be something about it because otherwise Jack Douglas wouldn't want to set foot inside. Once we got into the mix I understood because the atmosphere was so unpretentious, and they had the gear! Topflight gear-wise. We cut the track "In My Dreams (I Fly)." We cut it in two takes. Then I layered the vocals and Jack got real excited. He saw the influence of the Beatles and Todd Rundgren or David Bowie and Peter Gabriel. He said, "This is really interesting. Now we're going to the Record Plant!" Douglas was intimately familiar with the Record Plant, having started his career there as a custodian and working his way in the control room as an engineer and ultimately producing hit albums at the studio. "A couple weeks later, we convene in Studio B, which is significant because that is the same room where Jimi Hendrix cut most of *Electric Ladyland*. I thought, 'All I need to do is be buried here!' It was a lot to take in, man! That was one of the most thrilling days of my life, that first day. Our relationship was very congenial. Jack gave me a tour of the whole studio, showed me where they recorded in stairwells, etc. Warren Benbow became our de facto drummer; he had been playing with James Blood Ulmer." David Gross handled bass duties. "We could add keyboards or backing vocals after laying a rhythm bedrock. We had six songs in the can, three were already mixed, I had the submixes.

"Then we broke for the holidays. I went back to Texas for Christmas. When I came back to New York [after February], I received a memo in the mail that said our sessions were suspended. I couldn't get hold of Anthony Countey because he was abroad with Bad Brains. Lynn Robinson explained that she was still on holiday hiatus. That's where everything starts to get blurry. I'm asking Andy Griggs, 'What's the hold up?' He says that a check never cleared, a substantial check, maybe \$17,000. This check became a bone of contention. Within a couple of weeks it becomes a full blown accusation. Jack's production company Waterfront accuses Shake the Earth of financial fraud. It then came to my attention that Andy had acquired a financial backer from his camp. Anthony wasn't privy to this information. I don't like to get too deep in the weeds with the specifics of these things because none of these things have been proven in court." But this mysterious backer/investor had contributed cash with the intention of reaping a windfall as the project came to fruition. "I couldn't get a sit-down with any of my principal management [team members] to tell me what the hell was going on. I'm stuck like Chuck. I was in a quandary because the management team had paper on me, the production company had paper on me. I wasn't even a free agent. I was bound until I could acquire a legal release. My whole career was stalled and that drove me into a deep depression. I was having suicidal thoughts. It had taken me twelve years from inception to get to that point. Just months before everyone was telling me I was going to be the

next big thing. I had every reason to believe it, it wasn't just pipe dreams. It was heart crushing. As March moves into April, I'm talking to my sister Stephanie and I told her, 'If I don't figure this out, I'm gonna kill myself.' I needed to take a break before I took another step forward. My managers couldn't tell what was going to happen next. In fact, they were becoming evasive. My sister said, 'I need you step away from all that. First of all, I'm grieving as you are about the loss of Dad. And the last thing I want is to have to be grieving the loss of my brother. So I need you to come out here and see me! Even if for a few weeks. You don't have to work or think about the music business.' We were struggling with this horrific patricide. When she couched it like that, it broke through. All this other stuff should be secondary. We had to heal our internal

a career crisis. In retrospect, it probably wouldn't have hurt to get sober. But I was too busy licking wounds. And meanwhile, Living Colour is starting to pop up on MTV. And I'm looking at it like, 'My boys have got my spot!' I'm happy for them, they're certainly my friends and I'm cheering for them. But every time I see them, it's like it pops a stitch on me. I'm like, 'Bro, you're in my space. Or at least I should be right there next to you!' You know what I mean? You know how your head plays on you, especially if you've got an ego. I certainly did at that time!" Living Colour's debut *Vivid* for Epic Records would sell double platinum before the 1980s ended.

"A whole litany of events transpired over those next months in Los Angeles. I was only there seeking a way to get extricated

And meanwhile, Living Colour is starting to pop up on MTV. And I'm looking at it like, 'My boys have got my spot!' I'm happy for them, they're certainly my friends and I'm cheering for them. But every time I see them, it's like it pops a stitch on me. I'm like, 'Bro, you're in my space. Or at least I should be right there next to you!' You know what I mean? You know how your head plays on you, especially if you've got an ego. I certainly did at that time!" Living Colour's debut *Vivid* for Epic Records would sell double platinum before the 1980s ended.

wounds. So, I left for LA by the early summer." The only perceivable blessing that emerged at this daunting time was mother Navaline's case did not result in prison time, due to the strength of her otherwise incorrupt social standing within Wichita Falls.

When Griffin arrived in California, he contacted an old friend from Austin, Kim Banks. "She was just about to marry Joe Dallesandro. He was one of the stars from the Andy Warhol Factory camp. Joe was the star of *Trash* and *Flesh* and all those [films]. Tragic comedies are the way I look at them. Kim had visited me in New York six months previously when things were rosy. She picked me up at the airport. She was all cheerful because she was about to be married. I met Joe and we hit it off. I spent much of my social time with Joe and Kim. Joe was heavily involved in drug counseling at that time. Now I wasn't even citing the fact that I had a drug problem, didn't think I had a drug problem. I had a financial problem. I had

from this binding agreement that was keeping me out of the music business. I had cold feet about taking any initiative, being afraid of false starts." And in Los Angeles "the irony is that the whole hair metal scene is in full bloom." Eventually Griffin was drawn into the night life via friends he had accumulated from various scenes. Invited to parties at the famed Rainbow Bar, film premieres, even a staged after-hours circus, Griffin found himself straying away from the healing he was purportedly pursuing. "It was completely Hollywood, lurid, rock and roll bacchanalia. You go through one door, and you end up a hundred miles from what you had intended to do tomorrow. So, I made my social circle very compact, just my sister, Joe, and Kim. Then Joe's son Mikey came from Brooklyn and Joe entrusted me to act as a chaperone to take Mikey to parties that Joe was invited to. Joe never pressured me about [sobriety]. He never said, 'You need to make a testimony or earn these chips' or whatever. What was fascinating to me was the number of celebrities that were

[seeking] him in these private settings [as a counselor]. These were people I knew and recognized—you would too—and this illuminated me to the fact that maybe fame and fortune wasn't all that it is cracked up to be. It really started to seep into my little dense perspective that you have to look at this thing like a double-edged sword. In this particular timeframe I spent more time around actors than musicians. I got to rub shoulders with some really interesting people. One night we were invited to see a performance by Whoopi Goldberg at the Universal Amphitheater. She was gracious, thanked us for coming out.” Goldberg invited Griffin to the Peter Strauss Ranch for a pre-taping of pending comedy special *Fontaine—Why Am I Straight?* She said, “Come out and we'll have lunch, we'll have a soiree.” Billy Idol was featured in the opening skit and had his then guitarist Mark Younger-Smith, an Austinite, in tow. “We had hung out just a few weeks before at the Palomino. Mark and I were real good buddies.

We spent the balance of the afternoon and this time with Whoopi.” During the resulting conversations Griffin explained his legal dilemmas. “Whoopi gave me a referral to an attorney that would take my case pro bono to get my release from the binding agreement in New York. And I [finally] secured that over the course of weeks.”

Griffin would not hear the entire story of how the working relationships broke down until 2009. “From 1987 until 2009, I was operating in a veil of complete evasive fog. I've suspected malfeasance on behalf of [everyone involved]. They were the active and accountable parties for the management team, and none of these things should have been out of my immediate purview. But after a twenty-two-year vacuum, I finally got some answers via an online discussion on Facebook with Lynn Robinson. I suspected embezzlement by unknown parties. But an irresponsible, childish decision by someone on my team

torpedoed my project.” A jealous wife having detected an unfaithful husband in the organization had stopped payments on the checks, sowed distrust in the participants, and brought Griffin's ascent to a standstill, a freefall even.

With a new lease on life and feeling restless in California, Griffin spontaneously reached out to Austin guitarist Denny Freeman, a long-time friend. “I told him that I would maybe come back to Austin or try New York. He said in so many words, ‘If you can get back here, we can start a band.’ That sounded interesting. I ruminated on it for a few days. I called him back and asked if he was serious and he said, ‘I think that would be great. We can get something going. I have a rhythm section already with Sarah Brown and George Rains.’ And I'm thinking like J. Geils Band energy or [British pub rock band] Dr. Feelgood. Like maximum R&B but showcasing Denny. That was Chill Factor. So that's the end of '88 and we started playing at the Black Cat and we created a buzz. And then we started at Continental Club just as Steve Wertheimer was taking ownership. He offered to be our booking agent. We were playing the Continental three times a month. We played Hole in the Wall, Steamboat, anywhere but Antone's. Denny didn't want to play there. It worked out to our benefit. We started talking about creating original material. We taped a great live recording over at KUT with Paul Ray as host. Beautifully recorded. We were in great form.” Freeman was called away for family matters in Dallas, and the band lost steam during the resulting lull.

Griffin's disappointment was quickly dispelled by an unexpected phone call from Vernon Reid. “He tells me, ‘Guess what? We're going out [on the road] with the Rolling Stones.’ I said, ‘That's awesome!’” Living Colour were designated as the exclusive opener for the Rolling Stones' historic 1989 comeback as a touring entity. Griffin traveled with Living Colour from shows at the Dallas Cotton Bowl to Atlanta, two weeks of exposure to the jet-set life he had aspired to. He returned home to prospects such as a development deal with Ray Benson, cutting demos in an industrial duo RawHead TechX, and an opportunity to front Austin roots rockers Solid Senders. A chance encounter with Mississippi-born pianist Beth McKee led to collaborations and performances billed as Kulebra Dragons. In 1991, a benefit performance for beleaguered local singer/songwriter Alejandro Escovedo prompted the creation of an Austin supergroup featuring Stephen Doster, Will Sexton, Malcolm Welbourne, Thierry Le Coz, Kyle Brock, and Tommy Taylor, and christened by Griffin as the Cosmopolitans. “It was like a local Traveling Wilburys with a bunch of bandleaders in one band. Alejandro



Banzai Kik, ca. 1980. Counterclockwise from top C.K. Bailey with guitar, Richard Cooper, Bevis Griffin, Johnny Medina, Steve Dotolo. Courtesy of the Texas Music Museum.

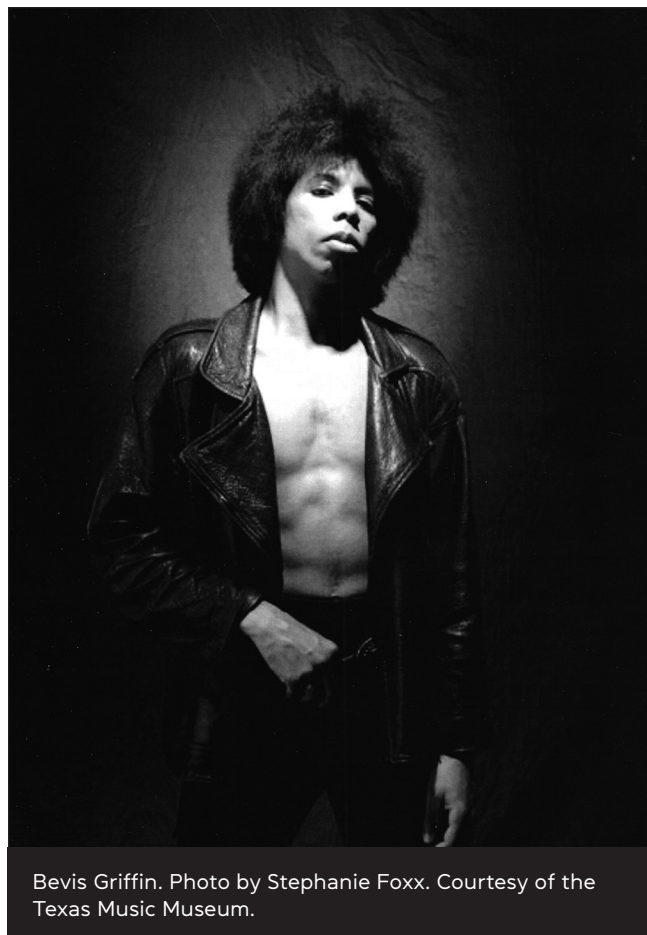
got wind of the scheme and he wanted to play with us, too. So, he was debuting songs that would subsequently appear on his first solo record. We made a club crawl playing local venues like Steamboat and Antone's. We sold 'em out. We did a whirlwind [local] tour: Hole in the Wall, Electric Lounge, Liberty Lunch, everything that wasn't the Frank Erwin Center.” The Steamboat performance had a particularly profound impact upon Griffin, as that's where he first encountered his wife to be, Kim.

“My [local] stock had been reconciled. Nobody ever got into, ‘Hey, what happened with that New York thing?’ It felt very supportive when I came back. All this perceived anxiety, all this embarrassment I had been harboring was all inside of my head. I kept myself very busy. So, by the '90s, I was really back in the mix. But now I'm chasing the perceived clock. Now my enemy is ageism. Between even the ages of 30 and 35, your window of opportunity begins to shrink exponentially. It's all about that next new, new, new, unless you've established some fanbase for yourself. At that juncture when I met my wife, things started to stabilize for me emotionally and psychologically because now I've got a solid partner and someplace to live. I took a job at Sound Recorders in Hyde Park where everyone and their momma was having cassettes made and then CDs. It didn't suck because it was music related. And it kept me abreast of who was doing what [musically]. I lowered my expectations. It wasn't a surrender, but what you call now a reality check.”

“In 1993, I had an overture from Dino Lee who had seen me in Solid Senders and he was friends with Kim. It was a project



Bevis Griffin and the Solid Senders/Kulebra Dragons. Courtesy of Bevis Griffin.



Bevis Griffin. Photo by Stephanie Foxx. Courtesy of the Texas Music Museum.

called the Love Johnson. He enlisted guitarists Billy White and Bobby Landgraf, Courtney Audain on bass. There were zany costumes. There was a show starring (pioneer dirty rapper) Blowfly. It was a funk metal free-for-all!" Immediately after the Love Johnson performances Griffin reunited with Chris Bailey for One Fell Swoop, described as "our earnest attempts to capitalize on this grunge wave that had swept the industry. But we were merging it with a new English sound like Radiohead or (Smiths guitarist) Johnny Marr. I still had my full power as a vocalist, three octaves. There was nothing else in Austin that sounded like it." Griffin had historically enjoyed a lengthy rapport with the Austin homegrown reggae outfit Killer Bees, even occasionally sitting in with the band. A stop-start side project with Bees guitarist Malcolm Welbourne (perhaps better known as Papa Mali) called Spy vs Spy later prompted a larger scale endeavor, the Instigators.

"In 1997, Malcolm called me up and said, 'I'm starting this thing up with [drummer] Frosty and we really need a singer. I think your energy will be good for the project.'" In addition to Frosty, members included Courtney Audain,

Billy Cassis, Tomas Ramirez, Paul Mills, Claude McCann, and Tom Robinson. "I was intrigued by [how it] was heavily geared towards the seminal influence of the Mardi Gras Indian tradition, not just the standard tourist fare. I got really engaged into the true, original, territorial street gang mentality. It was an homage to the area Native Americans that had extricated slaves. Each ward would represent a particular tribe. I was skeptical at first. I saw it as cultural appropriation. Once I understood the true historic origins, I was able to get with it. I did the research and I found layers to it. That informed my presentation of the show. I became infatuated with it. We had residencies at White Rabbit, Steamboat, and Antone's all at the same time. We opened for Maceo Parker at Antone's. We played with the Neville Brothers at the Galveston Mardi Gras and later with Cheap Trick and Chuck Berry in Galveston. We were writing original material. I had become friendly with Art Neville and I wanted him to produce our debut album." The Instigators' record label Fog City balked at Art Neville's requested wage. A clash with Welbourne resulted in what Griffin describes as "one of the most unfortunate things that has happened in my entire career. We went into the studio and cut the lion's share of everything we knew. We had these vibrant, live-sounding recordings, and the tapes were taken to a studio in San Francisco by producer Dan Prothero." There the album was bent to the inclinations of Welbourne, the only band member present for the mixing process. "That is the closest I have ever come to initiating an injunction on a project. It was completely diverted into a solo presentation as opposed to the visceral thing that had brought us to the table in the first place." That was in 2000.

"Subsequent to that, I went straight back to hard rock! I worked again with Chris Bailey in a project called Paradigm with Mark Younger-Smith as producer/engineer/studio owner. We were able to do it at an affordable rate. In 2005, we recorded these four tracks that we were gonna release as an EP. And I was so pleased because this was the first time I had done the entire [session] stone-cold sober. It was done all what I call 'raw dog.' By the time we hoped to market, my manager Chuck Rottersman had a mental breakdown. That was my indicator that no matter what I do, there seems to be some kind of impediment to the full progress of this thing. And if this is the way it's got to be, this is where I'm gonna end it! Because now I'm 40. I'm not going to pursue this fantasy, this pipe dream that is obviously not meant for me to achieve. By now this is like, my fourteenth project. Besides, do I really want to be [touring] on a bus? Maybe for a weekend (laughs). But not for three months! I can't think of anyone else that's tried harder to break that 'glass ceiling.' If it was in the cards,

it would have happened a long time ago. The music stands up. I have the songs, many on YouTube (others in personal collections). There is no argument that I was not technically qualified to participate. I could point fingers all I want but I won't. The buck stops here. It wasn't all painful. A lot of it was exciting. I never went through my career pouting or with a chip on my shoulder. No sour grapes. I loved making that music. When people invite me to jam or sit-in, I respectfully decline, it's not because I'm jaded or too cool. I just knew when I had to turn that light off. My final band was Bevis and the Painkillers, a tight little R&B outfit. We did this show opening for Rudy Ray Moore, "Dolemite"! For me it was like full circle. I had an imaginary conversation with myself and thought, 'Where do you want to be in five years?' and I said, 'Not here!' I didn't get into this to be obscure; I didn't get into this to be a starving artist. I got into this to participate at the highest conceivable level imaginable. That was my aspiration!"

Griffin then took his years of intense experience in the music industry into management. Starting with local musicians, he assisted unschooled acts on how to avail themselves to radio and booking entities. He upped the ante by working with the proto-punk Michigan band Death, made up of three Black brothers from Detroit. Death had broken up in the 1970s, but a documentary and rereleases by the Drag City label bolstered a groundswell of interest and the brothers reformed. Later Griffin served for two years as the manager of old friends Living Colour. "I had to get these guys to open up to interpersonal communications in a meaningful and pragmatic way. They had numerous delays delivering a record to their label Megaforce. I met them in Hidalgo, Texas, where they were opening for Aerosmith. Vernon pulled me aside and asked me to assist." Griffin agreed initially for three months and then for two years until their equilibrium was regained. Follow-up gigs included assisting André Cymone, Cincinnati funkster (and Bootsie Collins protégé) Freekbass, and John Norwood Fisher of Fishbone. In a moment of levity discussing business acumen he states, "I'm still fishing for it. I would be happy to be a late bloomer!"

After decades of being on the scene, Bevis still laments a dearth of diversity. "I have developed skin like rhinoceros hide. By going into all these uncharted spaces, not because I felt threatened, but I was determined not to be excluded. That's what it was. It never occurred to the people in the space to welcome me 'til I showed up. Here's a benign example. There was a recent record release party for Freda and the Firedogs at Antone's Records (in autumn 2022). I'm friends with Marcia Ball and really good friends with John X. Reed and Bobby Earl

Smith. I go to support the event and my friends. Well, I look around and I am the sole diversity factor in the room. It's not that big of a deal, I'm comfy because I know so many people there. But my point is this is what it was like for the majority of the '70s, for me. It was very unusual to see another person of color."

Most recently Bevis Griffin created curriculum utilized by instructors in musical programs offered by the School of Rock franchises. He says that it is important that students have a firm grasp of popular music history. To know the roots of the music they are taught and that the students are drawn to individually, to expand their personal palette and understanding. He remains happily married to Kim and they breezily abide in central Austin with chihuahuas Iggy Pup and Chula. "The episodic tone of my narrative, it really does have a sort of Forrest Gump underpinning to it, because I have landed in all these really interesting scenarios. Not always as a focal point, but even as an observer. It has just happened again and again." He shakes his head in disbelief, laughs. The circle of friends, great and dear friends, Bevis Griffin has accumulated now over his seventy years is extremely broad. Let alone the untold number of acquaintances, fans, and contemporaries. He says, "The phone still rings!"

Bibliography

This article is the culmination of personal interviews with Bevis Griffin in Austin, Texas. We thank Bevis for his time and generosity.

The quote from Margie Evans appears in the *Los Angeles Times*, "South-Central: Bluesroom Opening Hits a High Note," by Enrique Lavin, November 6, 1994.



Local Memory: Music in Austin before the Armadillo¹

Michael J. Schmidt

Austin's close synchronization with national trends was exemplified by the career of local bandleader Johnny Simmons. Simmons began leading a swing orchestra during the 1930s but changed into a rhythm and blues performer in the late 1940s as national music styles evolved. Courtesy of Austin History Center, Austin Public Library PICA_30019.

"Local Memory: A History of Music in Austin" is a digital public history project by Brian Jones and Michael Schmidt.

local-memory.org

Brian Jones and I first began discussing *Local Memory* at the end of graduate school. At that moment in 2014, we were, in many ways, pointed in the same direction. Although Brian and I both had decided to not pursue traditional academic teaching careers, we were enthusiastic about continuing some of the digital humanities collaborations we had started in the online journal *The Appendix*.² Finding a new subject was fairly easy. We simply picked up a topic we had already spent hours talking about over the previous five or six years: Austin's music history.

We were certain that we wanted to make it a digital project and were intrigued by the possibilities a website could offer for experiments in form and content. Where to start was less obvious, however. Ultimately, we decided to first explore the periods about which we knew the least. Most scholarship on music in Austin has focused on the last third of the twentieth century, although important work has been done by Michael Corcoran, Margaret Moser, and Richard Zelade on the preceding decades.³ By looking at the interwar and immediate post-war eras, we hoped to illuminate some of the elements that fed the remarkable cultural bloom in Central Texas that began during its countercultural moment.

Thus, *Local Memory*'s first two online exhibits point to a somewhat forgotten period in Austin's music history: the years between the onset of the Depression and the beginning of rock and roll. For most listeners, these are likely unfamiliar decades. The 1970s have long dominated Austin's musical identity, endowing the city with a reputation for non-conformity in a sea of traditionalism.⁴ By Ronald Reagan's second term, the Texas capital was synonymous with outlaws and outsiders, hippies and intellectuals, much of it driven by musicians and venues like Willie Nelson, Doug Sahm, Townes Van Zandt, Antone's, the Soap Creek Saloon, and the Armadillo World Headquarters.⁵

The powerful legacy of the 1970s, however, has obscured the ways that Austin was already a unique musical place before the advent of the cosmic cowboys. *Local Memory* shows that it already stood culturally apart from Texas's other major cities during the first half of the twentieth century, albeit in a way remarkably different from its later reputation.

Roughly spanning from 1929 to 1955, *Local Memory*'s current exhibits document two thriving local music scenes that emerged during these years. The first, "Athens on the Colorado," focuses on dance orchestras at the universities while the second, "The Rise of the Honky Tonks," covers small vernacular pop bands in working-class dance halls and bars. Together, these scenes embodied what made the capital a distinct musical environment in the decades before the 1970s: Austin was remarkably in sync with the national music industry in a state producing a staggering number of regional innovations.

LM Athens on the Colorado: The Dominance of the Universities, 1929-1946[Blog](#) [About](#)**Introduction: Athens on the Colorado**

Although not typically given much attention, Austin's music scene during the 1930s and early 1940s was unexpectedly vibrant for the modest size of the city at the time. It was a pop music world whose character largely reflected an emphasis on modern sophistication, dance orchestras, universities, and segregation. As a place with a consistent, large student audience, Austin had numerous local orchestras during these decades and also attracted major national "star" talent. Beyond sweet and swing bands, Depression-era Central Texas supported a wide and varied environment of informal and vernacular performers and music as well, including jubilee quartets, cowboy songs, and street corner blues singers.



Hogg Auditorium, University of Texas Campus, Ellison Photo Company, February 2, 1934
Austin History Center, Austin Public Library C06812

Austin, 1900-1940: Urban Planning, the Hill Country Environment, and Jim Crow Segregation

Listen to Andrew Busch, author of *City in a Garden*, speak extensively about Austin's urban history, its investment in its arid but beautiful environment, and its history of segregation.

- Introduction
- Jim Crow
- Urban Planning
- New Deal Austin
- African American Cultural Centers
- Mexican Americans
- The Environment

The title page to Local Memory's first exhibit, "Athens on the Colorado," provides a view of UT's Hogg Auditorium, an introductory essay, and audio segments about Austin's urban/environmental history with Andrew Busch.

Local Memory tells this story as much with images, maps, graphs, primary documents, oral histories, and music recordings as it does with text. A website instead of a book or article, it gives readers/listeners the chance to hear Nash Hernandez discuss his father's life and band; see the economic disparities between Black and white musicians in Austin through data and graphs; read a 1938 article in the *Daily Texan* explaining jitterbugs; track the growth of honky tonks between 1935 and 1950 through interactive mapping; and take in the ambience of Depression-era UT dances through a photo essay. *Local Memory* attempts to create a polyphonic narrative: to not only include the voices of other authors and participants, but to do so through many forms of information.

Local Memory's multimedia content shows that, if Austin became intractably linked to folk-affirming, intellectual, and outsider music in the late twentieth century, it stood out as the most pop-centered city in Texas in its earlier years. Instead of bucking the trends of the music industry, it was more deeply attuned to them than any other city in the region. At a time when musicians in Dallas, San Antonio, and Houston were creating the distinctive regional styles of Western swing, honky tonk country, conjunto, orquesta music, and early rock and roll, Austin did the opposite: it closely followed the broadest forms of national popular music.

This is most clear in the music of the 1930s and early 1940s, the subject of the exhibit "Athens on the Colorado: The Rise of the Universities." Although forgotten now, Austin was a major hub for big band music during the height of its New Deal popularity. This might seem surprising for a small city that was geographically and culturally far removed from the

film industry, recording studios, and Tin Pan Alley on the East and West coasts. Austin's large student population and the growing resources of its colleges, however, helped ensure that its musical life was far richer and more prestigious than other Southern and Southwestern towns its size.

College students' money and taste dominated Austin's commercial pop music world throughout the 1930s and early 1940s. This demographic gave the city a unique musical profile in Texas during the period. Although vernacular musics, like fiddle tunes and barrelhouse blues, were certainly present and beloved by their listeners, Austin's live music world was overwhelmingly characterized by modern dance orchestras. The highly arranged swing and "sweet" music of these bands was the hallmark sound of the national industry at the time, the essence of mass-marketed and large corporate trends. This mainstream orientation distinguished Austin from the music scenes of other Texas cities, where national big band styles were played at dance venues and hotels but existed as a small part of a larger panoply of local styles.

The University of Texas's growing student body and oil wealth made Austin a consistent destination for now legendary orchestras of the era, like those of Louis Armstrong, Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, Guy Lombardo, and Dizzy Gillespie. At the same time, the constant appetite for dancing from the students, clubs, and fraternities/sororities created a foundation for the city's first sustained ecosystem of local orchestras, who largely looked to syndicated radio and the national music industry for inspiration. As a contemporary poll in *Billboard* demonstrates, the University of Texas had

become one of the biggest venues for dance orchestras in the country by the early 1940s. Putting on close to 100 concerts in 1942, UT not only far outpaced all other single institutions of higher education, but it put on around 20% more dances than all the universities in California and Pennsylvania combined.

Although the University of Texas was only one of four colleges in Austin in the 1930s, it commanded the most resources. Its cultural and financial draw were, in fact, considerably greater than the rest of the city as a whole, giving it an outsized influence on Austin's cultural character in the 1930s. UT students—perhaps because they were young elites

of the most innovative, successful, and respected orchestras in the country to East Austin. The Cotton Club on East 11th Street, which served as a dance venue for Samuel Huston and Tillotson students, hosted some of the era's premier touring bands, including Jimmie Lunceford, Earl Hines, Louis Armstrong, Don Redman, and Lionel Hampton. During a portion of his 1936 tour, Duke Ellington stayed for five days in East Austin, where he had friends amongst the local faculty. Although his band didn't perform at the Cotton Club, he made numerous appearances at important black civic institutions, including talks and solo/duet performances at Tillotson College, the Samuel Huston College Chapel, the Metropolitan AME Church, and Kealing Middle School.

Austin's place as a major center for African American higher education in the Southwest in the 1930s also attracted some of the most innovative, successful, and respected orchestras in the country to East Austin. The Cotton Club on E. 11th Street, which served as a dance venue for Samuel Huston and Tillotson students, hosted some of the era's premier touring bands, including Jimmie Lunceford, Earl Hines, Louis Armstrong, Don Redman, and Lionel Hampton.

self-consciously aware of being in what others considered a backwater—tended to favor the most "sophisticated" styles offered by the popular music industry, not regional music made by non-professional or working-class musicians.⁶ Consequently, music in the Texas capital was decidedly more mainstream and outward-looking than any other city in the state during this period.

UT was not all of Austin, however. The city's segregated African American colleges, Samuel Huston and Tillotson, formed a rich, if largely separate, musical environment. Judging from the available sources, Black undergraduates' popular music taste was similar to their white counterparts—they favored large bands that played the cutting-edge swing music at the center of the music industry in the second half of the 1930s. Many of the region's African American dance bands, in fact, were linked to local colleges, like the Sam Huston Swingsters and the Prairie View Collegians.

Austin's place as a major center for African American higher education in the Southwest in the 1930s also attracted some

If Austin's preference for big band music in the 1930s and early 1940s deeply linked it to the central styles of the Depression-era market, the appearance of new local venues, sounds, and audiences between 1942 and 1950 kept it in sync with contemporary shifts in American musical life. The thrifty pre-war years were a time of market consolidation and



The Ben Young orchestra was part of the local dance scene in Austin during the 1930s. Here the band performs for one of UT's "All University Dances" (or "Germans") in 1934/1935. From *The Cactus Yearbook* (Austin: The University of Texas, 1935).

an emphasis on styles with wide appeal, namely pop-oriented big bands and dance music. The post-war music market, on the other hand, fragmented into an array of cutting-edge genres, small record companies, and demo-geographically-specific audiences. This was a moment of radical creativity by the pioneers of bebop, R&B, modern country and western, Chicago electric blues, conjunto and the independent labels—like Prestige, Atlantic, Starday, Chess, and Ideal—who recorded them.

Local Memory's second exhibit, “The Wild Side of Life: The Rise of the Honky Tonks, 1940-1950,” traces the growth of the dance halls, musicians, and audiences that fostered this music in Austin. Venues like the Skyline Ballroom and the Victory Grill primarily catered to working class dancers

From the beginning, these halls were decidedly part of the town, not the gown. Initially fueled by GIs on leave from the newly built Camps Swift and Hood, these threadbare segregated halls became permanent venues for the area’s white working-class musicians and audiences. Ultimately, these honky tonks, along with analogous clubs in East Austin, created alternative worlds for live music, challenging the power long exerted by the universities and colleges over the sounds of the city.

At the same time, the honky tonk era maintained an important continuity with the big band scene of the 1930s. Like its predecessor, the post-war music scene kept Austin well attuned to the national culture industry, which was in a process of deep diversification. Again, the city did not

The honky tonk scene exemplified this departure. By the second half of the 1940s, a rim of rough and tumble venues—memorably called “skull orchards” at the time—lay just beyond Austin’s city limits. These clubs provided a home for the burgeoning sounds of electrified post-war country music and western swing, music that previously had been peripheral to the commercial concert life of the city.

and featured emerging styles of pop music often deemed unsophisticated or primitive by culturally aspiring students. Breaking with the previous two decades, these spaces and dancers supported a whole new generation of musicians in Austin, dramatically expanding the kinds of music played in public.

The honky tonk scene exemplified this departure. By the second half of the 1940s, a rim of rough and tumble venues—memorably called “skull orchards” at the time—lay just beyond Austin’s city limits. These clubs provided a home for the burgeoning sounds of electrified post-war country music and Western swing, music that previously had been peripheral to the commercial concert life of the city. Austin’s hinterlands became a magnet for local acts and country and western groups from the surrounding counties, including hit-making artists like Hank Thompson and Jimmy Heap. These venues were soon plugged into the national circuit. They consistently drew major touring stars from California and the newly minted country capital in Nashville throughout the 1950s.

revolt against mainstream trends but closely followed them. Ironically, keeping pace with patterns driven by other parts of the country made Austin more closely resemble the rest of Texas, which had long fostered a diversity of innovative regional styles.

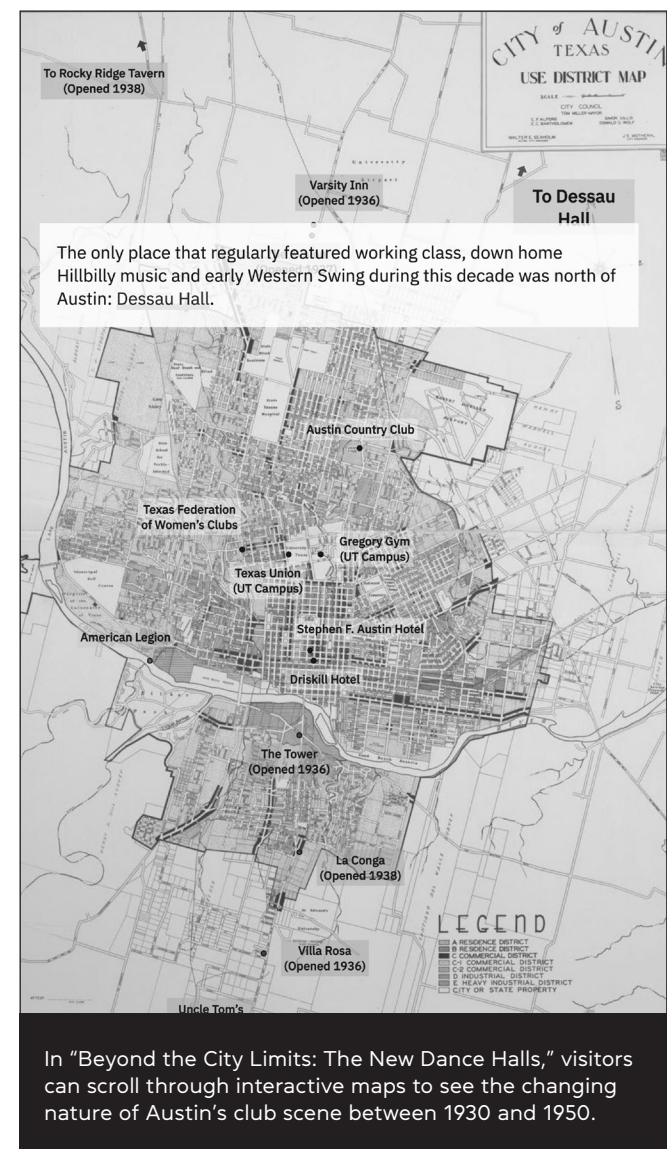
It was only in the late 1960s and early 1970s that Austin began to turn itself into a haven for less-commercial, progressive, and counter-cultural music. That outsider identity is now likely in retreat, however. As the city becomes increasingly expensive—rents, for example, rose a remarkable 40% in 2021⁷—the relatively cheap and arty environment that undergirded Doug Sahm’s “Groover’s Paradise” and Richard Linklater’s *Slacker* is disappearing. For all its future-oriented claims, the tech industry has seemingly returned Austin to the past, renovating and flipping the capital into a big-city version of the elite mainstream culture of its interwar period.

But that is just where our story is at the moment. As an open work in progress, *Local Memory* will continue to expand and be revised over time. The site, in this sense, is meant

to stay *in media res*. We hope that additions to the current exhibits—like upcoming pieces on the Bright and Early Choir, Lavada Durst (Dr. Hepcat), and radio in Austin—will broaden and add nuance to our historical portrait. New themes and research may also modify the work already posted. Our next exhibit on Folklore, Folk Music Collecting, and the Folk and Blues Revival between 1930 and 1970, for example, will show another side of university music culture and its relationship to other Austinites. Stay tuned. ★

Notes

- 1 This article is a revised version of “Local Memory: Telling Austin’s Music History,” *Not Even Past*, September 1, 2022. I am grateful to *Not Even Past* for their permission to reprint this article.
- 2 Brian Jones and Michael Schmidt, “The Appendix, Appendixed,” *The Appendix* 1, No. 3 (July 2013). <https://theappendix.net/issues/2013/7/the-appendix-appendixed>.
- 3 See posts on Michael Corcoran’s website (<https://www.michaelcorcoran.net/>) like “She’s the Boss: Dolores and the Blue Bonnet Boys” and “East Side Stories” and Margaret Moser’s work for the *Austin Chronicle*, especially “Bright Lights, Inner City: When Austin’s Eastside music was lit up like Broadway” and “Keeping Up with the Joneses: A Way of Life Compressed into Two Lives.” Richard Zelade, *Austin in the Jazz Age* (Charleston: The History Press, 2015). Beyond published work, institutions like the Texas Music Museum and the now defunct Austin Music Memorial have done much to document and commemorate a wide range of music in Austin.
- 4 For an example of how Austin’s identity is deeply associated with the music and culture of the 1970s, see John T. Davis’s *Austin Monthly* article “How the 1970s defined Austin.” <https://www.austinmonthly.com/how-the-1970s-defined-austin/>. The major exceptions to this timeline are the early folk career of Janis Joplin and the psychedelic scene revolving around the 13th Floor Elevators and the Vulcan Gas Company. These counterexamples comfortably fit as predecessors to the ethos and style of what came after them, however.
- 5 To understand the growth of the progressive country and counterculture scene in Austin and its relationship to the image of the Texan, see Jason Mellard, *Progressive Country: How the 1970s Transformed the Texan in Popular Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013).
- 6 For example, Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys—whose Western swing was massively popular with working class audiences in Texas, California, and the Southwest during this period—never played on campus.
- 7 Abha Battarai, “Rents are up more than 30 percent in some cities, forcing millions to find another place to live,” *Washington Post*, January 30, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/01/30/rent-inflation-housing/>.





The Last Filling Station: Robert Earl Keen's Texas

By Rich Kelly

As August turned into September in 2022, Robert Earl Keen was winding down his I'm Coming Home Tour. The six-month farewell run culminated in a surprisingly rainy three-day Labor Day weekend stand at John T. Floore's Country Store in Helotes, Texas.

Floore's had been the site of Keen's legendary 1992 *Live No. 2 Dinner*, a key moment in the Texas legend's career and the *Viva Terlingua!* for a new generation of homegrown Texas Country artists Keen inspired to revive the progressive country era that had inspired Keen himself.¹ Keen's final show even featured one of those he inspired, Brendan Anthony, longtime fiddler in Pat Green's band and current head of the Texas Music Office, presenting one of his heroes with an official proclamation from the State of Texas honoring the songwriter. In the week leading up to that final show, Keen wrapped up his performing career on his own terms.² Sunday night he showed up spontaneously at Austin's legendary Continental Club, established in 1955, with band in tow and asked management if they minded if he got up and played a few songs. He explained injuries and weariness were ending his touring career and he always really liked the place. Three days later he popped in a little further south on Congress Avenue for one last (unannounced) coffee house gig at Cosmic Coffee.³

As a young man, Keen explained, his hero had been rodeo hall of famer Phil Lyne. Lyne had retired from rodeo in 1972 at the age of twenty-five after winning his second consecutive world championship. Keen admired Lyne, who spoke at Keen's final show, for walking away early to raise his daughters on his ranch while he still had his health. Keen's back had given out the year before making performing painful, a problem that worsened with a series of allergic reactions to the medicines prescribed to treat the pain. While Keen remained a potent live draw, at the age of sixty-six, the beloved singer had little left to accomplish.⁴ Since his debut release in 1984, Keen has released twelve studio albums along with seven live albums. He is considered a major figure in the birth of one genre, Americana, and the founder of a second, Texas Country. In 2009, artists inspired by Keen recorded a tribute album, *Undone: A Musicfest Tribute to Robert Earl Keen*. His songs have been covered by dozens of artists ranging from superstar George Strait to country supergroup the Highwaymen to crossover juggernauts the Chicks. He has been honored with a BMI Troubadour Award and as a distinguished alumnus from his beloved Texas A&M University, and inducted into the Texas Heritage Songwriters and Texas Cowboys Halls of Fame. Keen boasts nine appearances on PBS *Austin City Limits* broadcasts and a pair of *Texas Monthly* covers. Long before he walked off that stage in Helotes for the final time in 2022, he had helped redefine country music in Texas and beyond.

Both the music 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



Robert Earl Keen onstage, undated. Photograph by Sam Kindrick. Courtesy of the Wittliff Collections, Texas State University.

City, Cheyenne and a score of other cities whose name once held a different kind of promise.”⁶

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 includes identifying themselves with cultural markers associated with their home state such as cowboy 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.⁷ At the turn of the millennium, “performing the Texan” through the celebration of Texas music and its attendant culture once again took center stage for a new generation of young Texans.⁸ 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 a founding figure in the Americana movement and the undisputed patriarch of the Texas Country scene.⁹

Sharpstown, a suburb in southwest Houston, was literally a prototype of the new suburban Texas McMurtry 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 US 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.¹⁰

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.”¹¹ Like McMurtry’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 enjoyed spending his evenings watching and listening to the Czech and German polka dances.¹²

In middle school, Keen’s taste evolved more towards the popular rock music of the time, such as Cream and the Beatles.¹³ By high school, Keen’s brother Dan, nine years Robert Earl’s senior, turned on his younger brother to country music. Hank Williams and Buck Owens, along with Rodgers, were favorites of the Keen brothers.¹⁴ Keen found a kindred spirit in his “best friend since the third grade,” Bryan

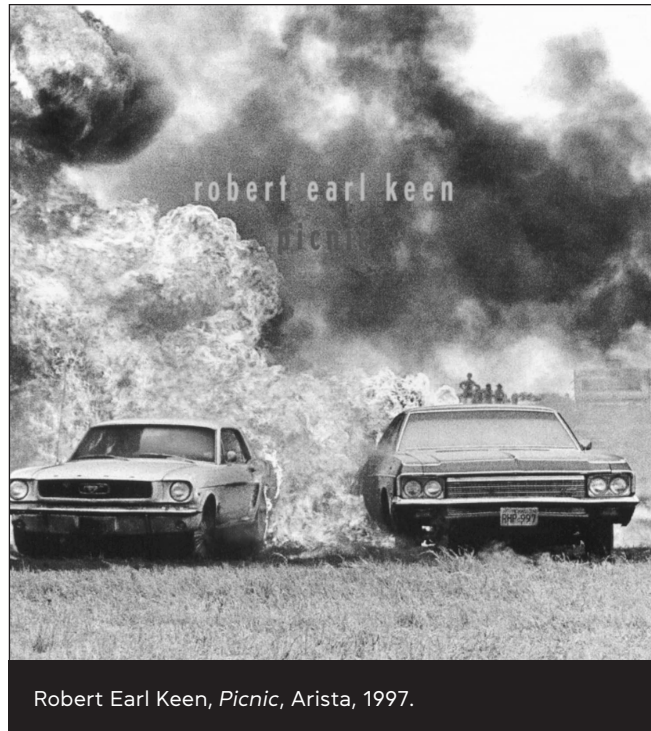
Ushered in by Bob Dylan’s 1967 release *John Wesley Harding*, mainstream rock acts such as the Byrds, Poco, New Riders of the Purple Sage, and the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band embraced country elements in a style dubbed country rock.¹⁹ Michael Coyle and Jon Dolan see this artistic choice as a protest of the 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.”²⁰ 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 and imagery was a manifestation of their failed attempts to raise the consciousness of blue collar Americans. In the chapter “I’m Dyin’ Here,” Cowie surveys popular music of the late 1960s and early 1970s to argue that during this time well-meaning liberals turned

As teenagers, Keen and Duckworth would cruise Sharpstown listening to Rodgers, Bob Wills, Ernest Tubb, and other early country stars. 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.

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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 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.¹⁸ Keen’s interest in country music mirrored a national trend towards country rock.

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, of abandoning the common man and 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.²¹ 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.”²² 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.”²³ As the seventies dawned, Keen walked a similar path.



Robert Earl Keen, *Picnic*, Arista, 1997.

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 Galveston’s the Old Quarter. Hopkins, Lipscomb, and 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.²⁸

Three performers, unknown at the time, would become central figures in the progressive country scene of the 1970s. Guy Clark moved to Houston from Rockport, where he met 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 Keen would champion in the following decades.²⁹

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.³⁰ By 1974, Keen’s senior year of high school, his older brother had converted Robert Earl into a rabid progressive country fan.³¹ Centered in Austin and associated with the famed 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.”³² 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 mélange of Western swing, honky-tonk, blues, Cajun, zydeco, and conjunto music, which became known in Texas as ‘progressive country music.’”³³

Keen engaged in the progressive country scene whenever possible, even foregoing his senior prom to catch Willie Nelson at Houston’s Half Dollar Club.³⁴ 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.³⁵ 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 sympathetic Willie for a brief moment before Nelson had to go jam with Oklahoma 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*.³⁶

friend out of Sharpstown to College Station.⁴¹ 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.⁴² “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!”⁴³

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

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 sympathetic Willie for a brief moment before Nelson had to go jam with Oklahoma great Leon Russell.

In the summer of 1974, Keen picked up a gut-string guitar discarded by his little sister.³⁷ 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.”³⁸ Pleased to see their unfocused son dedicating himself to anything, Keen’s “notoriously cheap” parents shocked the budding musician by buying him an expensive Martin D-35 guitar.³⁹ 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 applied these skills to 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.”⁴⁰

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

[Texas]. They loved country and bluegrass and Western swing, and they’d be playing fiddle and mandolin, and it was great.”⁴⁴ 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 young Aggies united by their interest in country, Western swing, and bluegrass music.⁴⁵ 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. The house on Church Street has long since been torn down and is now a parking lot.⁴⁶

The rotating group of musicians who congregated at the 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.⁴⁷ The band lacked the instrumental virtuosity required to play bluegrass standards, so Keen turned his attention to writing original music inspired by more contemporary artists such as Willie Nelson, Guy Clark, Jerry Jeff Walker, and Jimmy Buffet.⁴⁸



Robert Earl Keen at a special event for the Wittliff Collections, May 18, 2023.
Photo by Erich Schlegel. Courtesy of the Wittliff Collections.

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 listening smash "If You Leave Me Now" by Chicago.⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰ The Recording Industry Association of America certified *The Eagles Greatest Hits* as the first platinum record.⁵¹ 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 CBGB stage with musical revolutionaries Television, Talking Heads, Patti Smith, and others.⁵² A few miles to the north Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five became the first hip-hop group to play a major venue, taking the Avalon Ballroom's stage in Harlem that September.⁵³ An ocean away, a 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.⁵⁴ 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. Keen invited the young man 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.⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶ Familiar with the capital city from frequent college trips to catch music shows, Keen moved to Austin with his newly acquired PA and immediately began performing anywhere that would have him for tips or discounted meals.⁵⁷

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.⁵⁸ He 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.⁵⁹ These elements became a major source of Keen's appeal. Michael Kilian 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 fucking awesome."⁶⁰ 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."⁶¹

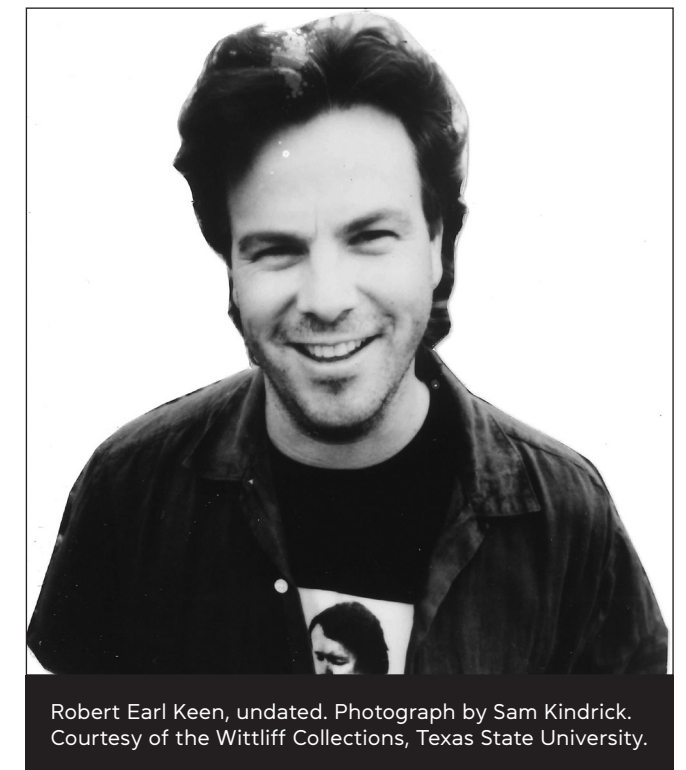
Keen landed a job as an oil proration analyst for the Texas Railroad Commission. In just a year and a half he saved enough money to send his parents on a European vacation before quitting his nine-to-five job to pursue music as a career. Keen's low-level gigs rarely paid more than \$25, which meant paying 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."⁶²

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* boasted a soundtrack that dominated country radio play, ushering in both a city slicker cowboy fashion craze and pop-infused country radio hits.⁶³ While Willie and Waylon still routinely charted singles, the stripped-down bluegrass and Western swing style Keen favored was largely out of fashion. The hot acts in town were the blues rockers such as

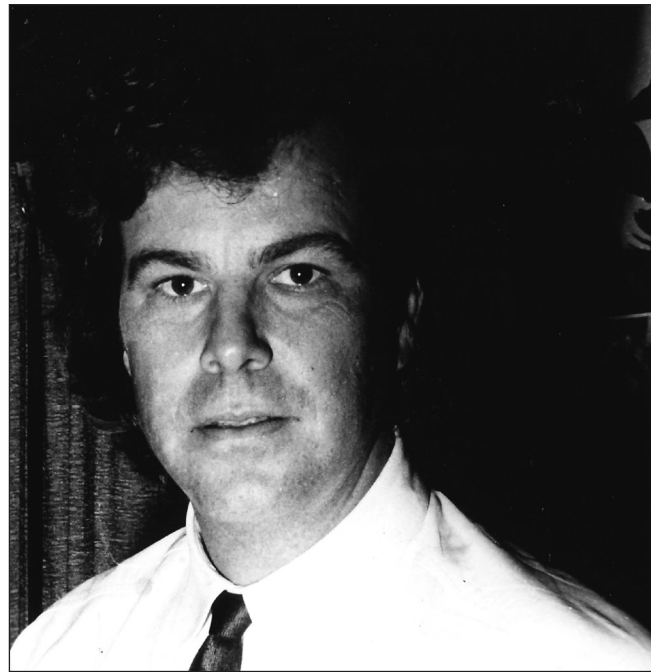
the Fabulous Thunderbirds, Lou Ann Barton, Paul Ray and the Cobras, and ascendant guitar hero Stevie Ray Vaughan. Other live music fans, intoxicated by a San Antonio Sex Pistols gig, began building a small but notable punk scene at Raul's, a Mexican American bar across Guadalupe Street from the University of Texas.⁶⁴ 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.⁶⁵

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, befriending such talents as Steve Earle, Nanci Griffith, Lucinda Williams, Mandy Mercier, and Eric Taylor.⁶⁶ 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's and Clark's poor-selling but critically lauded albums.⁶⁷

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



Robert Earl Keen, undated. Photograph by Sam Kindrick. Courtesy of the Wittliff Collections, Texas State University.



Robert Earl Keen, undated. Photograph by Sam Kindrick. Courtesy of The Wittliff Collections, Texas State University.

Earle warned Keen that Austin had “too many pretty girls and too much cheap dope.”⁶⁸ 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.⁶⁹ 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.⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹ In 1983, Keen won the festival’s prestigious “New Folk” award, joining previous winners Earle, Griffith, Tish Hinojosa, and his old friend Lovett.⁷² Keen’s dream of making a living performing his own songs was taking shape.

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 show’s host might play it.⁷³ 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.⁷⁴

Guided by a book called *Making Your Own Record*, a gift from Lovett, Keen tapped friends and fans to support his debut release.⁷⁵ 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 banker, provided the needed capital, and Keen headed to the studio.⁷⁶ 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 under the independent Rounder Records.⁷⁷ 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 1984.⁷⁸

Billboard Magazine, which offered one-sentence reviews of records released on independent labels, no matter how small, noted, “Engaging acoustic instrumentals and intelligent lyrics support Keen’s impressive vocals.”⁷⁹ 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” and whose music would never be played on the radio.⁸⁰

The album kicks off with the title track, which features a narrator recalling a night spent at the sort of Bohemian Texas smalltown dances Keen used to frequent on his family’s weekend trips to Columbus. Keen’s date talks the singer into

waltzing despite his 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.⁸¹

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.⁸² “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.⁸³ The track is acoustic, featuring only stringed instruments. A choppy, percussive rhythm guitar keeping time replaces drums while a stand-up

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bass follows the guitar through alternately descending and ascending chord changes. Paul Sweeney’s mandolin solos between verses add 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 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 the 1962 film *Giant*.⁸⁴ Here Keen makes a 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.⁸⁵ The closing of the theater referred to in the novel’s title symbolizes the end of the characters’ 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 / Who’s doing all he can not to give into the city.” Boyette lets

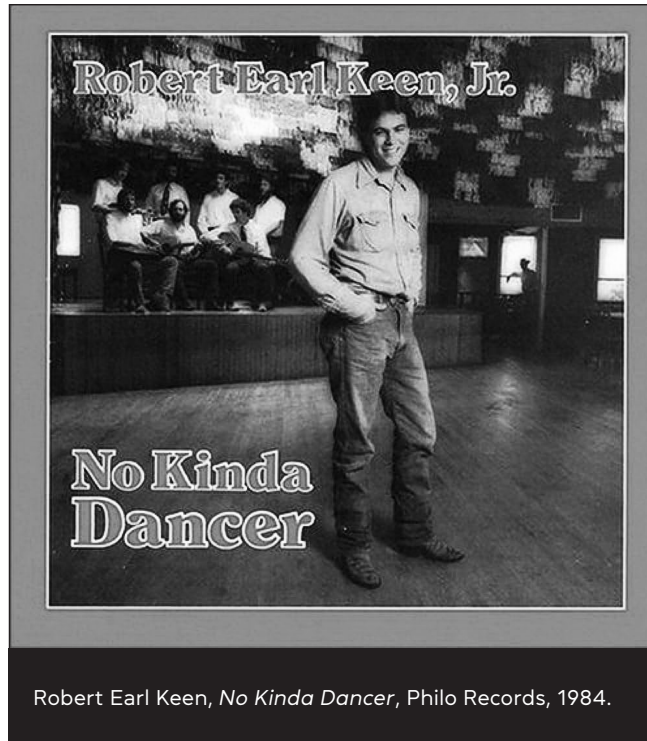
Keen slide on his rent in exchange for help with his cattle. In a *Texas Monthly* piece on great Texas songs, Lovett explained how Boyette “would walk right in, make himself at home. But Robert treated him like he belonged there, and he’d go help him move his cattle or build a fence. I admired that.”⁸⁶

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. Keen humbly credits his friend. “The song didn’t breathe until Lyle got to work on it.”⁸⁷ 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.”⁸⁸

To Keen’s musical descendants the porch on Church Street is a Garden of Eden, the birthplace of a new epoch in Texas music during a time of innocence. It represents the simpler mythological past both Keen and McMurtry imagined in their pursuit of their lost Texanness. The song, which has been profiled in *Texas Monthly*, holds a special place for Aggies. 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



Robert Earl Keen, *No Kinda Dancer*, Philo Records, 1984.

did not establish a trend in Keen or later artists' work, but "Christabel" and "The 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 a major theme in what would come to be called Americana music, and it emphasized the most significant lyrical difference between the genre and its Nashville counterpart. Both Nashville and Americana 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 smalltown 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."⁸⁹ 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 catching 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 the singer's southern drawl to number one. Hank Williams, Jr., an artist associated with the outlaw country movement, turned rural resentment into a cottage industry by the early 1980s. Singles such as the platinum hit "A Country Boy Can Survive" (1982) and "This Ain't Dallas" (1984) stoked white rural resistance to an urban world perceived as increasingly alien.

Keen's lyrics also frequently address rural themes, but their praise is almost universally limited to the agrarian past. He does not 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."⁹⁰

"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.⁹¹ "Death of Tail Fitzsimmons" is a rousing acoustic string band instrumental, which recalls an earlier epoch in Texas music even without 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."⁹² 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 nod 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."⁹³

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 "LA Freeway" (1972). Keen rejected the fantasy that an agrarian escape was a possibility. Contemporary rural life had little to offer college-educated young Texans on the verge of the twenty-first century.

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.⁹⁴ 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 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.⁹⁵

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."⁹⁶ 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.⁹⁷

Keen moved to Nashville in 1985, followed shortly by Kathleen. The two married, and Kathleen thrived. She saw



Robert Earl Keen at a special event for the Wittliff Collections, May 18, 2023. Photo by Erich Schlegel. Courtesy of the Wittliff Collections.

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."⁹⁸ 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?'"⁹⁹ Keen was reduced to odd jobs to pay the bills including running Nashville's legendary Hatch Show Print shop, digging ditches, temp work, and even landscaping country superstar Steve Wariner's yard in a torrential downpour.¹⁰⁰ 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.¹⁰¹

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



Danny Barnes and Robert Earl Keen at the Austin City Limits Festival, 2007. Photo by Jamie Crawley.

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an artist and repertoire person or an assistant to someone important who will talk up the artist. Performers attempt to showcase what might sound like a radio hit sung in a radio-friendly voice.

In Austin, particularly in the 1980s, a showcase of this sort 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 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.¹⁰² 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."¹⁰³ Keen's

dream of finding his place in country music was unraveling.¹⁰⁴ His frustration was complicated by the success of his friends.

By the early 1980s, Tony Brown had worked his way up to producing records for MCA in Nashville. His musical bonafides include playing keyboards for Elvis Presley and Emmylou Harris's Hot Band.¹⁰⁵ Harris first gained wide attention for her work with Gram Parsons on 1974's *Grievous Angel*. 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 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.¹⁰⁶ 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.¹⁰⁷

Dubbed the class of '86, Brown's discoveries challenged mainstream country music's status quo. Under Brown's production, Texans 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 North Carolina new traditionalist Randy Travis, Brown's 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 alternative country, Americana, and Texas Country.¹⁰⁸ Through Harris and Crowell, Brown had become acquainted with the circle of Texas ex-pats who spent their free hours 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.¹⁰⁹

Crowell was already an established artist when Brown produce *Diamonds and Dirt* (1987), Crowell's 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's, Griffith's, or Lovett's efforts.¹¹⁰

Earle's 1986 MCA rock-inflected debut *Guitar Town* shot to the top of the country charts. It 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.¹¹¹

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 three 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*

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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.¹¹²

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's base of Phoenix, Lovett used Williams's 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 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."¹¹³

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 and its 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 and also feeling left behind.¹¹⁴ 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."¹¹⁵ 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.¹¹⁶ Critics frequently described Keen's baritone as flat and nasal. Even more problematic for Nashville

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labels, his “voice can roam so far off key that whiskey jiggers rattle.”¹¹⁷ When asked who the next big thing to come out of Texas would be in the early 1980s, Kerrville 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 1986.¹¹⁸

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’ success, left him bitter, depressed, and seriously considering giving up his musical dreams.¹¹⁹ Despite his apparent failure, Keen left Music City with crucial ingredients of his future success and the foundation of the legend Texas 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.¹²⁰

Ironically, Keen’s failure to find a permanent place in Nashville is part of what made him so influential to a rising generation of Texans. While Clark, Van Zandt, Lovett, and Earle were all considered major influences, they lacked the immediacy of Keen to fans in Texas. Younger 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.¹²¹ 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.¹²² 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.

Keen’s relative anonymity, as compared to his more successful cohorts 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.¹²³

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 Kathleen a job in a nursing home they owned.¹²⁴ Keen worked construction and battled depression over the supposed 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.¹²⁵ 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 resurrected his career in the oldest continually operated dance hall in Texas.¹²⁶

By 1988, Case had begun booking Keen not only around Texas but also around the country, including shows opening for Guy Clark.¹²⁷ 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.¹²⁸ Founded in 1980, North Carolina-based Sugar Hill Records specialized in bluegrass and folk and, like

Keen himself, became a pioneer in the Americana genre in the 1990s.¹²⁹ Having recently released Van Zandt’s *At My Window* (1987) and Clark’s *Old Friends* (1988), the label was a natural fit for Keen.¹³⁰

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 Yarkin switching between fiddle, mandolin, and guitar. *Billboard Magazine* found Keen “droll and immensely personable” on his sophomore effort.¹³¹ The *Houston Chronicle* praised the release, observing that the album “showcases Keen’s sensitive songwriting, his hilarious wit and his easygoing approach to performing.”¹³² 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 goeey . . . like the enchiladas he sings about in ‘This Old Porch.’”¹³³ The reverence for and disconnect with Texas rural past is even more present on *The Live Album* than on *No Kinda Dancer*.¹³⁴ 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. Keen asks an old-timer to “share some memories” to “take me back to a time I’ve never seen.” In the chorus he questions whether the new friend’s father owned an

automobile or a two-horse carriage, if he rode a railroad, and what he thought the first time he saw a plane.¹³⁵ 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.¹³⁶ Keen’s second track on *The Live Album* established the artist’s on-stage persona that made his live shows legendary. Storytelling on concert albums is not uncommon, but typically it occurs before the song, allowing 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.¹³⁷



Robert Earl Keen at a special event for the Wittliff Collections, May 18, 2023. Photo by Erich Schlegel. Courtesy of the Wittliff Collections.

The album also includes stories before “Copenhagen,” a tongue-in-cheek ode to snuff, and in the middle of “The Bluegrass Widow.”¹³⁸ 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.”¹³⁹ 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.

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*.¹⁴⁰ Capitalizing on this momentum on

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.”¹⁴³

“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

“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’ and Ray Wylie Hubbard’s ‘Up Against the Wall (Redneck Mother).’”

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.”¹⁴¹ Keen’s warbling baritone now enhanced his “honest, eloquent” lyrics because, as Talking Heads’ David Byrne once explained, “The better a singer’s voice, the harder it is to believe what they’re saying.”¹⁴²

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 claimed, placed the artist

Walker introduced both Gary P. Nunn’s ‘London Homesick Blues’ and Ray Wylie Hubbard’s ‘Up Against the Wall (Redneck Mother).’¹⁴⁴ 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.¹⁴⁵ 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.”¹⁴⁶

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.¹⁴⁷ “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.”¹⁴⁸ Rooney was impressed enough with Keen’s “hapless, updated Bonnie and Clyde,” and the recording session continued.¹⁴⁹ Keen claimed his interest lies primarily in narrative songs such as “The Road Goes on Forever.”¹⁵⁰ 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.”¹⁵¹ Keen’s narratives played out like “little four-minute movies” and were rich with subtext, characterization, and implied endings.¹⁵²

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’s 150-seat Cactus Café.¹⁵³ 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. 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.¹⁵⁴

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, 1997.¹⁵⁵

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.”¹⁵⁶ 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, 1991.¹⁵⁷ “I could barely get to the front door, and I asked some



Robert Earl Keen at a special event for the Wittliff Collections, May 18, 2023. Photo by Erich Schlegel. Courtesy of the Wittliff Collections.

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.”¹⁵⁸

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 “LA Freeway.” Van Zandt’s most famous compositions were “If I Needed You,” a 1981 hit for Don Williams 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 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*.¹⁵⁹ In 1995, the country supergroup the Highwaymen made Keen’s “The Road Goes on Forever” the title track of their second album, allowing Keen to hear his early heroes Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash, Waylon Jennings, and Kris Kristofferson cover his composition.

While Keen's early 1990s rise in popularity in his home state left a new generation of Texas Country musicians 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.¹⁶⁰ 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.¹⁶¹

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, at six, nestled between his old friends Griffith at number two and Lovett at number seven. 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."¹⁶² Keen was delighted. "Finally, after years without a label for my music, I had a flag to rally around. . . . 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.'"¹⁶³

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.¹⁶⁴ Less than two decades later in 1995, the year

Gavin premiered the Americana chart, *Billboard* recognized fifteen different musical styles.¹⁶⁵

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 US 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, but a growing number of musical genres and subgenres were rapidly creating in music the pluralism associated with postmodernism.

Keen spent the 1990s establishing himself as a major figure in the rising Americana movement while simultaneously inspiring artists such as Jack Ingram, Cory Morrow, Pat Green, and Randy Rogers to create the musical genre known as Texas Country.¹⁶⁶ He assembled a respected touring band and become one of the state's top live draws. In 1997 Keen's role in forging a new music genre landed him a contract with Arista's Austin imprint. Keen had spent years trying to find a niche for his brand of Texas-based, roots-inspired "intelligent lyrics." In the end, he, and his musical peers, created their own. One night at the Executive Surf Club in 1998 I asked Robert how he categorized his music. He flashed his mischievous grin and gave me a line I had heard him use from the stage several times. "It's music for people who don't like country music." Keen's music is not in opposition to country music or rural America; it simply views this world through a slightly different lens. This shift in perspective opened up the music that inspired Keen to an entirely new audience and allowed him to overcome years of frustration to become one of the most influential and beloved Texas performers of his generation. ★

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For the Sake of the Song: Essays on Townes Van Zandt

Edited By: Ann Norton Holbrook and Dan Beller-McKenna (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2022)

Townes Van Zandt has been renowned as one of the greatest Texas songwriters. *For the Sake of the Song: Essays on Townes Van Zandt* offers a new look at the fabled songwriter through the lenses of literary criticism, musicology, cultural studies, and psychology. This edited collection traces Van Zandt's story from his wealthy upbringing in Fort Worth, Texas, to his career as a songwriter, to the mental turmoil he suffered and the resulting drug and alcohol addictions he endured throughout his life.

The book's introduction, written by editors Ann Norton Holbrook and Dan Beller-McKenna, admits that the collection is not an all-inclusive overview of Van Zandt's life, as that has already been well covered in other works such as John Kruth's *To Live's To Fly: The Ballad of the Late, Great Townes Van Zandt*; Robert Hardy's *A Deeper Blue: The Life and Music of Townes Van Zandt*; and Brian Atkinson's *I'll Be Here in the Morning: The Songwriting Legacy of Townes Van Zandt*. Rather, this work complements these existing stories by analyzing Van Zandt's upbringing, songwriting, musicianship, relationships, and mental health in new, unique ways.

The book's early chapters are written by two Van Zandt experts, Brian Atkinson and Robert Hardy, both of whom have previously published works on the songwriter. Atkinson takes an extensive look at Van Zandt's discography, and Hardy explores his musical influences, primarily by means

of literary analysis. Hardy's methodology is continued in the third chapter by Ann Norton Holbrook, who argues that Van Zandt created impersonal and "dramatic" art that complicates the portrayal of gender in his lyrics. Jim Clark also relies on a literary lens to explore how Van Zandt employs both disturbing absurdity ("macabre") and corny amusement ("mirth") in his songs, which he compares to the traditional English and Scottish ballads of Francis James Child and other classic poems. The next two chapters, written by Dan Beller-McKenna and Nathan Fleshner, examine Van Zandt's musical choices, namely his reliance on minor modes and his decisions on rhythm and meter on the 1971 album *High, Low, and In Between*. Both scholars make comparisons about how these musical choices mirror the songwriter's psychological state and struggles with mental illness. Similarly, Travis Stimeling discusses the "overproduction" of Van Zandt's early albums as a reflection of Van Zandt's emotional overproduction in his personal life, caused by mental illness and addiction. He argues that the musical overproduction might be understood as the production teams' efforts to "interpret, cope with, and even mitigate [Van Zandt's] excessive emotion." Blase Scarnati offers an examination of Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard's version of Van Zandt's infamous "Pancho and Lefty" and its music video, comparing this version with Van Zandt's original recording. Bruce Quaglia approaches Van Zandt through disability studies, comparing the songwriter to fellow Austin musicians Roky Erickson and Daniel Johnston, who also struggled with mental illness. Finally, the last chapter includes excerpts from the autobiography of Richard Dobson, who traveled on the road with Van Zandt and used a journal and tape recorder to document their time together.

The chosen articles in this edited collection provide a wide swath of

unique perspectives on Townes Van Zandt and utilize intricate and intense methods of exploring his life. While the editors claim in the introduction that this book is "not only for scholars," but that "enthusiasts of Van Zandt and the modern singer-songwriter tradition will find much [in the book that] interest[s] them" as well, many of the eclectic topics discussed in this collection are rather cerebral in nature. Despite the editors' claims of being accessible to the everyday reader, one must possess a deeper understanding of the jargon surrounding music theory and literary analysis to fully grasp a number of the chapters. Nevertheless, this book offers scholars and experts a very intimate analysis of Van Zandt, one that previous, more general works on the songwriter fail to do. Despite the handful of cerebral articles, the collection also contains several chapters that are more easily understandable to the everyday reader, such as Stimeling's piece on Van Zandt's early album overproduction, Scarnati's analysis of "Pancho and Lefty," Quaglia's cross-comparison of Van Zandt with Erickson and Johnston, and excerpts from Richard Dobson's autobiography in the final chapter. In sum, *For the Sake of the Song* provides a new, essential perspective on Townes Van Zandt that breathes fresh life into the understanding of his character, his music and songwriting, and his cultural recognition.

— Avery Armstrong



Our Contributors

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received both her B.A. and M.A. from Texas State University and focused her graduate studies in Public History and music history. Her Masters thesis, “The Lost Gonzo Band and the Creation of the Live Music Capital of the World: 1960s-1980s”, utilized oral histories to tell the story of the Lost Gonzo Band, who played with Texas progressive country icons such as Jerry Jeff Walker and Michael Martin Murphey in the 1970s. Avery currently works as the Administrative Assistant for the Center for Texas Music History and continues to research Austin’s progressive country scene.

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Rich Kelly

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