

# THE Singer

by **Stephen Hendricks** Photos by **Mike Bicknell**

"Imagine Johnny Cash meets Bruce Springsteen meets John Cougar Mellencamp meets Marty Robbins," one critic has written of the musician **Robert Earl Keen**, "and you'd still have it wrong." So who is this man?



The night before he played to his largest crowd, to twenty thousand people on the grass a hundred and fifty miles out of Houston, to college kids with chickens on their heads dancing a haphazard reel and grandparents in matching T-shirts leaning hard against the yellow barricades beneath the stage—on the night before this, Robert Earl Keen, forty-one years and seventy-five inches of Texas, played to what might be called more of a Robert Earl Keen kind of crowd. They were six, maybe eight hundred. They stood mostly on the dirt of the South Texas State Fairgrounds Coliseum, in Beaumont, where something called a coliseum might have dirt floors and open sides. In metal bleachers were lodged a few of the older fans, wary enough of the youngsters in the arena to put up with the bleachers' acoustics: strip-metal floors and benches under a corrugated-metal roof that made the screeches of horses in the coliseum's corral sound like freight trains grinding to a halt.

Most of the people on the dirt were members of what Robert and his band call the rowdy crowd. The reason they are called the rowdy crowd becomes clear to anyone standing among them when Robert plays, say, "The Road Goes on Forever," whose subtitle is "and the party never ends." The rowdy crowd is *tan*. It is *trim and overridingly blond*. The men, grown-up boys, really, wear white baseball caps and identical shirts that read PIKE and DEKE and are tucked tidily into relaxed-fit Levi's jeans. The women, no older than the men, wear oxford shirts knotted above their navels and unbuttoned over white T-shirts that are stretched like cellophane across their breasts. What is said among the rowdy crowd is said loud, with a lot of razzing and tugging and oh-my-gawd gesticulation and tightfisted handshakes. To every second hand a plastic cup of Shiner Bock beer has attached itself symbiotically.

Surrounding this core are the outliers. That night there were the teenage boys from a town over the Louisiana border whose hair had fallen to an electric razor and who stared at the ground and wondered—"Do you know Mr. Keen?" and, more to the point, "Is he nice?"—about getting an autograph. There were the two guys with Stetsons and vacuum-fitted Wrangler's who had lost their way to a Garth Brooks concert. There was the chemist from near Boulder who had driven down because Robert had two shows not three hundred miles apart this weekend and because Stevie Ray and Jerry were dead and now there was this rumor that Robert had cancer. The next night, in Shiner, there would be the fellow from New South Wales who didn't win the free trip to see Robert but who came anyway.

Lee Winwright, an angled, ponytailed young man who had sold jewelry and washed dishes before he answered an ad reading, "Roadie/road manager for Robert Earl Keen," said this of his first concert with the band: "It was at Luckenbach. You know Luckenbach? Tiny, out of the way. I didn't know what to expect. I'd never been to one of his shows, didn't know anyone who had. It blew my mind. First they sold out the dance hall—must have been two hundred, three hundred people. Then they sold tickets for outside. People were lining

up just to hear the music through the walls. They were basically selling tickets to get into town. I walk up and the manager of the whole town says, 'Well, you sold us out again.' It was totally insane. People were jumping up and down inside, hanging onto the rafters, and I really mean hanging onto the rafters. It blew my mind."

You could see how. Many minutes before nine, the rowdy crowd had already worked itself into a howling, hollering mess and was lurching through the first of several rounds of "Robert-Earl-Keen, Robert-Earl-Keen." By the time, many minutes after nine, that Robert and his band took the stage and the crowd released the obligatory ejaculation of approval, any of them could have gone home content with a night's entertainment. Robert stooped into the microphone. His height and his kid-in-a-sandbox smile notwithstanding, the stoop called to mind a witness under cross-examination, like someone too small taking on something too big. He said a few inauspicious words, leaned out to a roar, and, after more forgettable syllables and roaring, opened with "The Front Porch Song." "The Front Porch Song" is a favorite of the rowdy crowd. They sang, but their recitation could not properly be called singing along. More like singing over. Over, that is, the vocals, the two guitars, the fiddle, the bass, the drums, and the twin ziggurats of speakers and amplifiers that could and did vibrate the dirt floor of an open-air coliseum. As the crowd's singing rose, the ancillary noise—the gossiping, the small-time feuding, the joshing—did not diminish. Possibly it grew. An initiate could have been forgiven thinking she had walked in on a sing-along with the state of Texas. The following night, the crowd swollen thirtyfold, she *would* have been at a sing-along with the state of Texas.

Robert is a storyteller, and halfway through "The Front Porch Song," he told one. "I wrote this song with my friend Lyle Lovett. He and I and my friend Duckworth, who's playing the fiddle, would sit out on the porch and play bluegrass music and country music and folk music and wave at the people as they walked by, hoping they'd wave back, or say howdy, or come up and listen to the music. Mostly people just gave us sideways glances and walked a little faster.

"Our picking and grinning was only interrupted by my landlord, Mr. Jack Voyett, who lived in Millican, Texas, south of College Station. He'd drive up in the middle of the day in his pickup with the air conditioning on and his window cracked and just a little bit of that air conditioning streaming out, and say, 'Robert Keen, do you have a minute?' And I'd jump in his truck and go out to this ranch of his that was overrun with those big old thorn rosebushes and fix his fences and dig his ditches. He didn't have hardly any grass, and his cows were so skinny they looked like those calendars that Ace Reed used to draw that you'd see on the wall of a feed store somewhere. I pulled one of those skinny cows out of the mud one time. It got sunk down in the mud on the tank there, and old Mr. Voyett said, 'Oh, that cow's gonna die,' and I said, 'Mr. Voyett, I think I can get it out.' I went and got some cardboard and some old pieces of carpet and wrapped it around that cow, tied it to the back end of my truck, let off on the brake and stomped on the gas pedal, just about jerked

the horns off of that cow. But she made it. After that, Mr. Voyett looked up at me and he said, 'You know, Robert Keen, I wouldn't a-given you a nickel for that cow ten minutes ago.' I said, 'I'll buy that for a nickel, Mr. Voyett.' He said, 'Oh, no, now she's worth about two hundred dollars.'

Another night Robert would tell it this way: "At the end of a day of work we would go up to Mr. Voyett's house and his wife would fix a pimento-cheese sandwich. Mr. Voyett would split that pimento-cheese sandwich three ways and after dinner we'd go outside and watch the sun go down and lean up against his truck a little bit and after a while he'd look right at me and he'd say, 'Robert Keen, I got something for you.' He'd pull out two dollars and hand it to me and say, 'Is that enough, Robert Keen?' Well, what could I do? I was an Aggie. I looked him in the eye and I said, 'That's plenty for me, Mr. Voyett. I ain't got no change, you know.'

"Mr. Voyett passed away a few years ago. They tore the house down that we lived in on Church Street. Every time I go back to College Station I always go by there. I know right where it is, because we were right across from the Presbyterian church, where the Presbyterians gave us the most crucial sideways glances of anybody in the town of College Station. On Sunday mornings we used to go out there in our underwear and kick beer cans out in the front yard to show them what real sinning was like—give them something to talk about on their way home or to Luby's. Now when I go by there there's nothing but an empty parking lot full of weeds and grass. Except for there is this beautiful crepe myrtle tree there that we used to pee on when we drank too much beer. And I will say, it is the greenest, most beautiful crepe myrtle tree in the county."

And the rowdy crowd whoops and careens, especially the Aggies from College Station, and Robert returns to singing about the porch and Mr. Voyett, a tightly constructed metaphor of bygone Texas that critics from places like West Forty-third Street and North Michigan Avenue and Times Mirror Square have called "honest," "textured," "finely observed," "authentic," "instantly likable," "an undiscovered gem." But to the rowdy crowd, whom the same critics have called "beer-swilling viruses," and who have, in fact, broken records for sales of beer where Robert has played—to them, in Beaumont, on Friday night, the song was just good.

Robert followed "The Front Porch Song" with "Corpus Christi Bay," a feral ride through the oil and beer fields of his college summers. Men lifted women onto shoulders, and the women moved like the bullriders who had worked the coliseum hours earlier. The crowd was shouting the lyrics louder now, and the band—Bryan Duckworth on fiddle, Bill Whitbeck on bass, Rich Brotherton on guitar, and Tom Van Schaik on drums—having seen this a hundred or five hundred or a thousand times before, drew it all in and tossed it back. They played a series of favorites: "Gringo Honeymoon," a country song with a precise, contented moment in the Coahuila desert which Robert wanted, impossibly, to freeze; "Shades of Gray," an unbound rock song about some sorry kids who stole a cow but, in a felicitous juxtaposition, were saved from greater disaster by the Oklahoma City

bombing; "The Five Pound Bass," a bluegrass-tinged number about, well, a five-pound bass. Duckworth, whose fiddle runs with "The Five Pound Bass" like a reel letting out line, reached the peak of his solo as a gust of wind swept either dust or smoke—the latter was credible—from his bow.

In the audience, a fellow who might have belonged to the rowdy crowd had it existed three decades ago and who backslapped his neighbors at each quickening of Duckworth's bow spotted a male reporter with an earring and collar-length hair standing nearby. He staggered over and asked, in reference to a local female journalist, "Are you Sherry Pine?"

"No," the reporter said.

"Well," the man replied, leaning steeply into the reporter's ear, "you sure do look like her!" then broke out in a geysir of a laugh and staggered back to his friend. The friend approached, put his arm around the reporter's shoulder, and said in a grandfatherly tone, "My friend, I think you just got roasted. Where you from?"

When told the New England city, he replied, "You're shitin' me. Just to write about Robert Earl?"

"Yup."

"Well"—his face lit up—"send him round!" And he reported to the first fellow, who returned to the journalist, his grin larger but his words solemn as a bank draft. "You give him a good write-up," he said, working to focus his gaze. "They have to know."

**R**obert Earl Keen is a problem. More to the point, he is several problems, the sum of which is that people—journalists, music people, ordinary people—do not know where to put him.

"Imagine Johnny Cash meets Bruce Springsteen meets John Cougar Mellencamp meets Marty Robbins and you'd still have it wrong."

"All you need for inspiration in country music is an old dog, a case of beer, and love unrequited. Keen takes these basic elements and mixes them with rock and folk for a cross-section of real life."

"Instead of trying to be clever and placing a redneck twist on a cliché or phrase—like having a 'thinking problem'—he makes the rednecks his characters and puts them in desperate situations. The resulting appeal runs deeper than a catchy Nashville melody or a sappy Nashville lyric. The songs are partially about the real romanticism of living fast and hard and partially about the fear of having to endure the consequences of having lived that life."

"They're story-songs, stuck waist-deep in reality, driven by characters."

"They're spaghetti Westerns that have been condensed to three minutes and forty-six seconds and thrive on concrete detail."

"He's writing some of the best lyrics in country music today. Keen doesn't merely say he crossed the Rio Grande; he describes the two dollars in the weathered hands of the ferryman. He doesn't just confess he's lonely; he describes the faint lights in the car radio when he's driving alone across New Mexico all night."

"His songs, they catch like flypaper."

"They've got one common thread: unwavering directness and honesty."

"'Mariano' is the most compassionate lyrical commentary on the illegal-alien issue since Woody Guthrie's 'Deportee.'"

"'Merry Christmas From the Family' is the white-trash Christmas song of the year. It's knock-you-dead hilarious."

"While it's among the funniest Christmas songs ever written, he's not laughing at these people. He's one of them, too. We've eaten ribs with them, bought bait from them, piled in the car next to them with an ice chest full of longnecks."

"It could have been written by Flannery O'Connor."

"It's got a hellbent roadhouse feel."

"It's pensive and poignant."

"It's at once expansive and harrowingly intimate."

"It's more like edgy rock and roll than a folksy strum-along."

"There's too much going on in his head for country and too much shit on his boots for folk."

Robert is a writer's writer, John McPhee set to melody. His songs run to eight minutes. He uses words like "protagonist" and "extended metaphor" and "denouement" to describe their content. He has said he is a writer of stories that just end up as songs. He would like to write a novel, but he is afraid of what happens when his writing is freed from rhyme, when his prose is allowed to go anywhere. He is a reader. When asked of what, he has answered, at different points in his career, John Cheever, J. D. Salinger, Cormac McCarthy, Ernest Hemingway, Larry McMurtry, Raymond Carver, William Styron, Elizabeth McCracken, Sherwood Anderson. Fehrenbach's *Lone Star: A History of Texas and the Texans* sits on his bookshelf at home. He does not read much Jane Austen. At a recent concert in Memphis, Mississippi's Larry Brown showed up with his whole family, and Robert was surprised that a writer—a real writer—would travel to see him. He is looking forward to reading Brown's *Dirty Work*—he has read *On Fire*—because a guy at Robert's record company called Brown "a poor man's Harry Cruise" and Robert can't wait to pick a fight with the record man.

When you call someone in the music business a writer's writer, you often have not delivered a compliment. You have often, in fact, made a derogatory statement about the singer's voice, and reactions to Robert's voice could be said to prove the rule. It has been called grainy and gritty and rough. It has been called painful. It has also been called warm, endearing, emotionally taut, ragged yet bright, high-spirited, dry and laconic, conversational and eminently listenable, lighthearted, a toast-voiced deadpan baritone. He is said to "whine like the wheels of an old truck" and to sound "suspiciously like go-

proof erosions," like "a lumberjack swallowing a tumbleweed," like "a strong young bullcalf of the range wondering where in the world all his family and friends had gone." On several occasions his performances have recalled the guitarist Leo Kottke's comment about his own voice: "like geese farts on a muggy day." Alongside Margo Timmins, the cream-cadenced singer of the Cowboy Junkies who helped Robert on his album *Picnic* (1997), Robert's vocals have been said to resemble a set of preserved frogs—the kind that have been arranged in a diorama playing billiards and that you buy just over the border in Mexico—sitting next to an elegant vase. Timmins differs: "He sings from the heart. You feel like he's just a man, telling you stories. It's so pure and honest." A reviewer who did not understand this sort of charm wrote that Robert should have left one of his two live albums in the can. Another reviewer wrote, "Mr. Keen's flat, tuneless voice takes some getting used to at first. Then again, so did Bob Dylan's."

"I just feel," Robert has said, "that I have the most accessible voice in the entertainment industry. Anybody can sing my songs as well as I can, and I'm damn happy for it." His fans agree, but Nashville does not. Los Angeles and New York do not. When people do not know how to categorize your music, when you discuss your lyrics as literature, when your voice, like okra, is an acquired regional taste, you end up everywhere in the record stores—in the folk section, the country section, the rock section—but nowhere on the FM dial. On the Friday night of the South Texas State Fair, a fairgoer asked a stagehand, a burly man in a Clint Black T-shirt listening to Alan Jackson from a boom box, if he knew which artist was playing on the stage he was building. "Shit if I know," the crewman replied. The fairgoer tracked down the crew's foreman and asked him. "Sure," the fore-

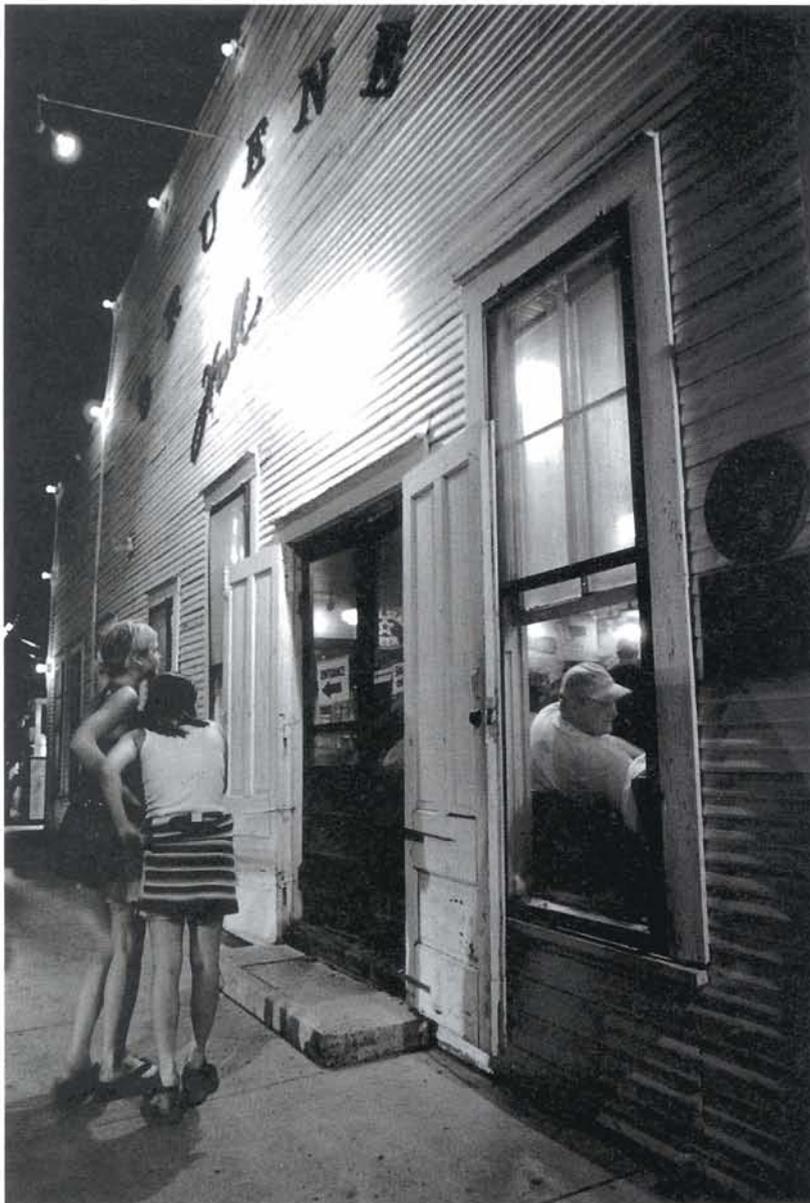
man said, "Robert Earl Keel."

If, then, despite these obstacles, you want to play music—that is, if you want people to pay you to play music—you tour. You play one hundred, one hundred fifty, two hundred dates a year. You lose money on the road, hoping you will gain it back on album sales or on your next swing through town—or on the next album or the next swing, or the next. All of which pretty much describes what Robert Earl Keen has been doing the past fourteen years.

Houston, like most Texas cities, is an aggregate of suburbs, isolated by class and bound by asphalt like muffins in a tin. Sharpstown, the nearest thing to a neighborhood where Robert grew up, is distinguished for Sharpstown Center, one of Houston's first indoor shopping malls. Robert cannot describe Sharpstown or himself in



Robert Earl Keen



*Fans listening to Keen outside his sold-out show in Gruene Hall, the oldest dance hall in Texas, 1998*

Sharpstown. “Mediocre,” “dead,” and “middle-class” are words he summons between long gaps; they appear to describe both the place and himself. He was neither athletic nor intellectual. He cannot recall any interests, did not socialize with a particular crowd. His friend Duckworth, who has been close to Robert since third grade, can produce little more: “Around ninth grade we decided we were going to be cowboys, which mostly meant reading rodeo magazines and stuff. We had this bucking barrel, made it out of a fifty-five-gallon drum. Tied a rope to each of the four corners, then tied each rope to something in Robert’s garage. We broke somebody’s leg doing that, but it was fun . . . that was about it.” Late in high school Duckworth and Robert started picking guitars.

he’d try to find a place that he had heard let people play. If he couldn’t find one, he went somewhere, anywhere, and talked the manager into letting him play. Often, he played to nobody. Mostly he played for tips. Sometimes he lost money because he stocked the tip jar and someone walked off with the stock. Mornings after, oil men with million-dollar investments held the phone line as he stumbled for another cup of coffee.

Eventually Robert landed a regular show at Jalapeño Charlie’s, a tin shack of a restaurant on the south shore of Austin’s Town Lake. Jalapeño Charlie let him play two days a week in the afternoons for tips and a half-priced enchilada plate. Nobody came. The rare customer who did wanted to hear covers instead of songs Robert had written. Robert did-

Robert went to college at Texas A&M, a hundred miles up Highway 6 from Sharpstown, mostly because Duckworth was enrolling. They spent their time on the porch on Church Street, playing music and, as Robert likes to say, talking about where they were going to move to when their parents got their grades. He met Lyle Lovett on the porch, and Lovett, who recruited people from around the state to play in the Basement Coffeehouse, asked Robert to recruit students and other local acts. Robert did, enduring a thousand Eagles songs and Jimmy Buffet songs and Gordon Lightfoot songs but also becoming friends with the likes of Nanci Griffith and Steve Earle. It was Robert’s first extracurricular activity.

“My dad was a geologist, and I didn’t know that there was any other choice till I was twenty years old than to go in the oil business. ‘When are you going to take more geology, son? Music is an avocation, not a vocation.’ So when I got out of school and moved to Austin, I worked in the Railroad Commission regulating oil companies for a year and a half. I had no interest in it. Summers in college I actually enjoyed working on rigs as a roughneck. I worked as a floorhand for two summers, then I became a derrick man. I could do it. It was good, honest work—hard, very hard. But there’s no homework. You go back the next day and you work your ass off and you don’t ever take anything home.” Austin was a party. After a day at the Railroad Commission or the Internal Revenue Service, where Robert made time, he would hurry home, put his P.A. system in the back of his car, and, if he had arranged a gig, drive to a beer joint and play. If he didn’t have a gig,

n't know any covers. But it was a chance to write a set list, to hear his own voice over a P.A., and to tell stories—a chance, in other words, to be a musician. He loved it.

In 1985 he borrowed a hundred dollars from each of twenty friends, hocked his shotgun, and made his first album, *No Kinda Dancer*. He released it on his own label, Keen Edge Music, which is to say that after renting Austin Recordings Studio and taping several songs with the help of friends, he had a company manufacture the records and tapes, then drove to record stores, where he forced a few copies on managers. *No Kinda Dancer* was folk and country and bluegrass and some other things. The title song, about a shy Robert on a date at a German beer hall, was set to the polka rhythm of the Bavarian immigrants who settled the Texas Hill Country. "Death of Tail Fitzsimmons" was a hillbilly instrumental in dobro, guitar, and mandolin. "The Front Porch Song" made a low-rent, endearing debut. The album's fatherland was never in doubt: in "Swervin' In My Lane," "finger" was rhymed credibly with "danger"; a hunter in "The Armadillo Jackal" stalked his armored prey with the underside of his pickup; Lyle Lovett and Nanci Griffith and Joe Ely sang harmonies. *No Kinda Dancer* received a few good reviews (since its 1995 rerelease by Sugar Hill Records, it has won more than a few) but no airtime, and not much else. Robert said, "The day the UPS truck came with all my records I stuck the boxes in my room and pasted the pictures of me everywhere. I just absorbed me. Then I drove up the road to Temple, a hellhole of a town where I'd gotten a gig at the Landfill Saloon or some place like that. There was one guy. Really, truly, one guy, some Chinese guy, doing his calculus homework and wearing a Walkman, sitting right in front of me. That was my record-release party by default."

Not long after, Steve Earle told Robert that a country musician needed to be in Nashville. In Austin, Earle said, the water carried the mañana syndrome: mañana I'll put out the second album, mañana I'll quit the day job; today I play Jalapeño Charlie's and drink with my friends. Robert left Austin a short time later. "When I had first gone over to Austin," Robert said, "I was in a play called *Nashville Road*. *Nashville Road*, it mapped out my whole life. The whole story line was, Guy goes to Nashville, has terrible marital problems, hooks up with all the hotshots in town, screws around on his wife, goes back to Texas, and—this is the part that didn't happen to me—he accidentally shoots somebody and ends up in jail. But all the other stuff happened, and about a year after the play I left Austin and moved to Nashville."

**N**ashville is a paint-by-numbers, cookie-cutter world. It's produced a generation of Chippendale dancers in Hoss Cartwright hats.

"We call it Nashville flat-belly pretty-boy country."

"It's a computer-trimmed audio sheen dominated by up-tempo, line-dance-oriented tunes and one-note sentimental ballads."

"It's fatuous feel-goodism."

"Nashville wouldn't know a country singer if one crawled out of Hank Williams' coffin."

Nashville has become a synecdoche in the same way that Orlando and Levittown and Redmond are synecdoches, emblems of a reasonable urge gone unreasonably, Americanly awry. Country neotraditionalists recall a time when it was not so, when small masterpieces like Guy Clark's *Old No. 1* and Willie Nelson's *Red Headed Stranger* slipped through the Nashville sieve. But the difference between then and now is less of kind than of degree. From the start, from, that is, the 1920s, record companies hired scouts to find music marketable to rural people, who did not much care for ragtime, jazz, the classics, or anything else record companies sold. In Chattanooga and Asheville the scouts found hillbilly music, and in no time shows like Alka-Seltzer Barn Dance were traveling from one radio station to the next hawking wares. As a side effect, some hillbilly music was played.

But the neotraditionalists' point remains: Nashville does not make even accidental masterpieces anymore. Profits have grown, thus risk, thus stasis. Tom Van Schaik, Robert's drummer, explained, "The same four drummers and the same four bass players and the same four engineers are working on everybody's album, because the labels won't let you use anybody else. The producers out there like to know that they can go in with this rhythm section and cut five tunes in a day, so there's no heart in it. And the musicians, some of them are playing three, four sessions a day, and they run out of ideas. So they say, Okay, I'll just use this one that I used on this other one this morning, and it'll be an album track so it won't matter. They're just playing chords." The few musicians—Lyle Lovett, say—who just a few years back made beautiful Nashville albums have fled to their labels' Los Angeles and New York branches, where they need not fight for money to record and promote. For old-school musicians still innovating, like Johnny Cash and Merle Haggard, there is no place in Nashville for their albums, no "Nashville" station that will yield them three minutes' air.

For a brief moment in the 1980s, Robert believed Nashville might take a different direction: "It was a real weird time in country music. The urban-cowboy thing had fallen off and they were in the midst of Lee Greenwood, but they needed some edge stuff and they went and signed Lyle and Nanci and all those people and some other people who were rough-edged. I always thought I was right here at the right time and just couldn't get to them. The thing is, those guys who got signed knew what they were doing. I didn't. The biggest bunch of bullshit in Nashville is this line, 'I can hear a good song, doesn't matter what kind of demo you have.' Total bullshit. They can hear a good song if it's produced well, and they don't care about the lyric. I always cared about the lyric and concentrated a lot of energy on that. I never got hip to the whole demo thing. Still haven't, really. Lyle, being the way he is, was 100 percent prepared. Thorough. Extremely. He acts like he doesn't know what he's doing, but he knows what he's doing. He went there with a tape of, like, eighteen songs that had been produced to the max. It's his first record basically, and part of his second record. It was a beautiful piece of work. He went up there with that and went to the top guys, didn't screw around with a bunch of other people. I got in my 1965

Dodge Dart with my little twenty-dollar Panasonic radio to my ear, because my car radio didn't work, drove all the way straight up there for fourteen hours, turned off the freeway onto Jefferson Street, which is the wrong side of town, and got lost. I was screwing up, didn't know what was going on from the minute I got there. It was a sign. I didn't have anything on tape. I did have my record, but it was folk. It wasn't country like they wanted to hear. Lyle's wasn't exactly what they wanted to hear either, but it was so well produced and clean. He had help from his parents, and he spent thirty thousand dollars. I spent two thousand dollars. What I didn't realize was that there's a million guys like me. At the same time I was driving up there, there was probably some guy driving from Omaha and some guy from Detroit and they're all in their junky cars and they're all going to stay on somebody's couch. With my voice, I couldn't afford to do that. Nanci, too, she has a beautiful voice. She was already signed up with Rounder, and there was a huge buzz all around the country about Nanci before Nashville picked her up. Lyle also has a great voice. And he had the weird hair, which he had the whole time, but when he realized that it was grabbing him a lot of attention, he just kept growing it higher and higher and higher. I remember him saying, 'It's so easy to be weird in country music.' I was like, okay. See, he had a grip on that—you needed this attention. Whatever it is, get some attention."

Seven albums later, journalists still ask Robert what his angle is, what should grab their attention. He tells them the songs are really good, people like them. The journalists go away confused. Publicists at Robert's new record company, Arista Austin, have also been confused from time to time. When the Florida legislature stripped a public radio station of funding for playing one of Robert's songs (the song uses the words "whore" and "son of a bitch"), the publicists urged Robert to make the talk-show rounds and speak about censorship. He declined, saying he didn't know anything about censorship. The publicists wondered what *that* had to do with anything. (Robert did play a benefit concert for the station, which eventually raised the money the state had taken away.)

Robert stayed in Nashville for twenty-two months. He talked his girlfriend, Kathleen, who came from what he calls "a good San Antonio family," into coming to Tennessee, then he talked her into marrying him. She worked as a receptionist for an obstetrician, he as a landscaper, a bookstore clerk, a pizza deliverer, a ditch digger. His ego rested precariously on his career, on doing well by his wife, and he made his off hours an on-again, off-again trudge to record companies. The few times he got a hearing, the front-line men and mid-level producers did not understand his songs. When Lovett's version of "The Front Porch Song" ("This Old Porch") was released, Robert received mild attention but nothing tangible. He plied his next best connection, Steve Earle, who sent him to his publishing company. Months of pestering resulted in a contract, if that is the word for an agreement by which one writes songs for six months, gratis, and thereafter receives the possibility of fifty dollars a week. Robert said no thank you. He gave up trying to sell the songs he liked, tried instead to write songs that sounded Nashville, but they were forced

and inauthentic and received an even worse reception. One frozen January weekend, Robert and Kathleen drove their '72 Impala—the Dart having crapped out—to Lawrence, Kansas, where a couple of bars paid Robert three hundred dollars a show. Heading home on Interstate 70, the Impala's timing chain broke. As they huddled on the side of the road waiting for help, Steve Earle's luxury tour bus blew by, insult to injury. They spent the weekend's earnings fixing the car. Back in Nashville, they found their rental house had been broken into and torn apart. It had snowed, and the snow had iced over, and Robert's first thought on seeing the wreckage was that he should calm down, they would be all right, they could make it through the snow and the ice and the cold of winter and the torn-up house and no money. His next thought was that that might be true, but he could not make it through another Nashville summer, hotter than anything he had known in Texas. Nor did the thought of another minimum-wage job appeal. He told Kathleen he was ready to move back. "Let's go," she said. Two days later she was in Texas.

"I didn't know jack shit about Bandera except it's a bunch of drunk cowboys," Robert said. "That's all you ever hear about Bandera. So I flew down here to see Kathleen and check out Bandera, and she met me in Austin. It was one of those totally windy, rainy, black days. It was also freezing-ass, but it had been hot in Nashville, so I had to stop at Ross Dress for Less and buy a jacket. I didn't have any money, so I wore the jacket all day, then took it back the same day and said it didn't fit. We drove here, and it looked like—you know the street in *The Last Picture Show*, in Vidalia? That's what it looked like. There wasn't a damn car on the street and the wind was blowing and leaves were blowing and there was maybe an old man walking down the street trying to keep his face out of the rain. I thought, *Goddamnit, this is the end. This is not it. This does not have a good feeling.*"

Robert was telling this story from a deck he and a friend had recently built on a ranch outside Bandera, in the Texas Hill Country. The deck was attached to a small trailer on a hill, which the Keens were turning into a guest house. Gentle limestone ridges framed the view north and south. Between them lay miles of mesquite and oak and the occasional truck tread and not much else. Robert and Kathleen owned much of it. Robert had evidently grown comfortable with Bandera. But a decade before, in 1986, having toured the area and returned to Nashville, he called Kathleen and told her he was having second thoughts about leaving Tennessee, about trading the possibility of a music career for the certainty of a town of eight hundred people and a dozen bars on the edge of the Texas steppe. Kathleen told him the decision had already been made. She had secured a job managing a nursing home that her parents owned. She had secured, with no collateral, a HUD-repossessed house with holes in the sheetrock and mildewed carpet, but a house all the same. She had no intention of not securing a husband.

Robert moved to Bandera.

He patched holes in sheetrock, he laid new carpet, he mowed the grass at the nursing home. He thought about



*At the Berges Fest, Boerne, Texas, 1998*

Nashville, about lack of preparation, about the right kind of music and the wrong kind of music. Weeks passed. He wrote songs for himself again. Here and there he played a club. One day the phone rang, and on the other end was a BMI man from Nashville. One of the last things Robert had done in Tennessee was to ask a man from BMI—Broadcast Music Inc., one of the industry groups to which just about every musician pays dues—to help him make contacts with record companies. The BMI man had not agreed that BMI owed Robert this service. Robert had said his dues were paying the BMI man's salary. The BMI man had said that Nashville was a difficult city to make a start in, wasn't it, and then had given Robert a lot of what he calls A-and-R-speak, which is not a compliment to the artists-and-repertory industry. Robert told the BMI man that he was a buttpastor and a wimpy individual and a few other things, and left.

The BMI man who was on the phone now was new. He said he had heard Robert's music and liked it, and when Robert was next in Nashville would he please stop by? Robert did, and quickly had appointments with six or seven publishers. He played them songs—Bandera songs—which led to several more appointments, which led, sometime later, to a curmudgeon at MCA Publishing named Al Cooley. Al Cooley was an Elvis freak, an Alamo freak, and a baseball freak and was about to become a Robert Earl Keen

freak. As Robert played for him, Cooley slumped lower and lower in his chair, stopping only when Robert stopped, then mumbled a few words and left the room. The next morning Robert got a call from Cooley, who said he had no idea what to do with Robert Keen, but Robert Keen was the best writer in town, the best thing, in fact, since Steve Earle, and he wanted to sign him to a writing contract immediately and Robert should not even talk to anyone else.

Robert went home and waited for the contract. It faltered. He went back to Nashville and told MCA he would haul their sand and carry their water and stir their cement; they just needed to give him a chance, a little something he could live on. He went home to Bandera with a contract and spent most of his earnings over the next year flying between Texas and Tennessee. His confidence grew. On one trip Robert ran into a producer named Jim Rooney, who told him he really liked Robert's live shows but was not quite sure how to capture the feeling in-studio. A few months later Rooney was producing *The Live Album* (1987), a performance by Robert at the Sons of Hermann Hall, in Dallas. A few months after that, in early 1988, Rooney followed with a studio album, *West Textures*.

There are critics today who plan their calendars around Robert's tours because of *The Live Album* and *West Textures*. When Robert comes to Chicago, a television reviewer for the *Tribune* tells readers to turn off their televisions and

see Robert instead. The same reviewer has recommended watching the televised country-music awards with the sound off and one of Robert's CDs playing, the better to understand what real country music sounds like. A fan of Nashville music wrote the *Tribune* and suggested the reviewer stick to TV in his column. The reviewer thanked the writer for giving him the chance to plug Robert again, and did.

Like all of Robert's work, *The Live Album* and *West Textures* cover a range of styles, but they pivot, in a sense, around "The Road Goes on Forever," a ballad about two young lovers who cross the country in a tangle of holdups and contraband and lawmen and a party that never ends while a guitar and fiddle wrestle between restraint and restlessness. Restlessness wins. The lyrics are exact, the story binding, the music young. A journalist for the Fort Worth *Star-Telegram* good-naturedly dubbed the song's live version, with its epic story line and its extra fiddle and bass and guitar riffs, "This Song Goes on Forever," prompting another journalist to point out that so does *The Odyssey* and it is not a line too long. Joe Ely, who has played as many Texas honky-tonks as anybody, liked the song so much he put it on one of his albums, which some reviewers deemed selfless since it upstaged Ely's songs. Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, Johnny Cash, and Kris Kristofferson, collectively the Highwaymen, made "The Road Goes on Forever" the title track of their second album. "The first time I heard it," Kristofferson said, "I said, 'That's the name of the album, the movie, and our lives.' I'll tell you, he's one fine writer."

Of the *West Textures* period, Robert's friend Duckworth said, "There was this radio station that started up in San Antonio. They were playing what's now called Americana, but there wasn't such a thing back then. They really liked Robert, and every hour they played one of his songs. One time we went to play at this club and there were all these people standing around outside. We thought maybe it was a crime scene. It took us a while to figure out they were here to see us. Inside, there wasn't really a stage, so we played in this little space on the floor, and there were so many people that there wasn't any room to move. That to me was the start of this Texas thing we've had for the last several years."

This Texas thing, of course, is the rowdy crowd. The rowdy crowd loved "The Road Goes on Forever." They loved "The Five Pound Bass." They loved the ode "Copenhagen" (to the tobacco, not the city), and they loved the marital guide "It's the Little Things" ("like the way that you remember / I came home late for dinner / eleven months and fourteen days ago"). Their most frequent comment to Robert is, "Man, we love to sit on the porch and drink beer, get real drunk, and turn up your CD real loud!" Robert has likened them to an Ozark family: once you draw a few of them, the whole clan is attached. It is said they are mostly Aggies who are amazed another Aggie did good, but they stream out from Texas Tech when Robert plays Lubbock and from UT when Robert plays Austin and even from Baylor when he plays Waco. One of them, known as Little John, put together a performance-art routine in which players act out "The Road Goes on Forever," *Rocky Horror* fashion, as the band plays. As the shows in

Texas grew larger and louder, Robert assembled a band to keep the crowd at bay. Collected from points along Texas's Interstate 35, the band presently gained a reputation as the best Saturday night in the state. More people came to the shows, and not too long later newspapers in Dallas and Houston and Knoxville, and the next year in Charlotte and Santa Fe, and the next year in Cleveland and Washington, were including Robert's concerts in their ten-best-of-the-year lists.

The albums sold meekly. Radio stations rejected the singles. Cambridge's Rounder Records, one of the nation's better-known independent labels, backed away from *The Live Album* at the last minute, leaving it and *West Textures* to Durham's tiny Sugar Hill. In 1993 and 1994 Robert recorded *A Bigger Piece of Sky* and *Gringo Honeymoon*, also for Sugar Hill. The dusty companion pieces rivaled *West Textures* in beauty and scope, and, at last, sold. Waterloo Records, to Austin what City Lights Bookstore is to San Francisco, sold more copies of *A Bigger Piece of Sky* than of any compact disc previously stocked. *Gringo Honeymoon* sold better still, a hundred thousand copies nationally. Items began to appear in *The New York Times* and *The Village Voice* and *USA Today* and *Billboard* that were less reviews of than appeals for Robert's work, each as grateful for what Robert was (genuine, literate) as for what he was not (Nashville). Robert, it seemed, had happened onto another "weird time" in country music.

The movement went by several names: authentic country, real country, alternative country, progressive country. Some called it "No Depression," after Uncle Tupelo's much-praised 1990 album of the same name that begat an Internet bulletin board that begat a monthly magazine: *No Depression* was what you read if you hated Nashville enough to spend money. The music later gained a quasi-official name when the trade magazine *Gavin* published a weekly Americana Top 40. Other names, less in use but perhaps the better for it, have risen intermittently: y'alternative, twangin', honky skronk, insurgent country, country-er-than-thou, truckstop, roots, alternahick. Those who listen to the genre tend to feel about it the way one feels reading *The New York Times* instead of *USA Today*. When they speak of the mainstream, they use words like Nash-Vegas and Trashville and disco-country, and they do not much care for anything else on the radio either.

Late in 1995 someone in Arista Records' New York office heard some of the music, or, as likely, heard some of the talk about the music, and decided that Arista's Nashville office was, well, a Nashville office, and for that matter the New York office was a little too New York, and Los Angeles a little too Los Angeles, and that nobody was catching what fell between those places. The company created an Austin office, and Arista Austin cast about for a flagship artist. They got Robert Earl Keen. Neither party realized quite what it was getting.

Robert said, "Right when we signed up, one of the guys from Arista calls my booking agent and says, 'You go ahead and clear his calendar for November and we're going to put some dates together.' The booking agent for all practical purposes is my friend, and he says, 'Is this what you want to do?' And I say, 'Absolutely not. Who has the gall to call you up and say clear my calendar?' They don't own me. We're supposed

to be working with each other.' That was a big eye-opening experience. They were surprised that I said no because they're used to signing somebody that doesn't have anything going, brand-new management, brand-new everything, and the company does tell those people what to do. Well, by God, I'd already gotten here. You can come to me and ask me and suggest and let's sit down and talk about what's going to work for you and what's going to work for me and how can we both be happy, or at least as happy as we can be. But you're not going to go around me."

**T**he day after the South Texas State Fair in Beaumont, Robert was the headline performer at the Shiner Bocktoberfest. Shiner Bock is a beer. Beer, as one might have gathered, has played a not insignificant role in Robert's songs over the years, and for a sum in the low five figures the brewer of Shiner Bock encourages Robert to continue the association in a more specific manner. Shiner is also a town. Halfway between Gonzales and Hallettsville, it is ninety miles from San Antonio, fifty more than that from Houston, and so far from Dallas it does not bear mentioning. But even in Dallas, Robert Earl Keen and Shiner Bock beer and the Shiner Bocktoberfest were being advertised. Come the Bocktoberfest, license plates in the streets of Shiner read Louisiana and Oklahoma and Arkansas. Vendors made a good business on chicken hats.

"I had wanted to headline that Shiner deal," Robert said, "ever since it started four years ago. There's a little bit of that self-satisfied feel, because last year we were supposed to headline it and then at the last minute they put the Fabulous Thunderbirds on top, which I thought was a mistake. I mean, they had a big career, but I don't even think Ken Wilson was with them and Jimmie Vaughan's not with them. It's just a bunch of old guys playing blues—not to slight them, but I didn't think that they had the drawing power, just objectively. So we got up there and played right before they did, and I mean three-quarters of the audience left after we were done. This time they weren't running away." (A month after the Bocktoberfest, Robert played in New York on a bill headed by the Thunderbirds. The *Times* told people to see the storytelling singer from Bandera and forget the T-birds.)

Robert's ambitions—"Anybody wants it bad as you," a record man once told him, "I reckon we ought to give a chance"—are an exposed vein. Coarse and vulnerable, they are likable in a person of integrity, a reassurance of his everyman-ness. But consummated, backed by what Robert calls the marketing muscle of a global corporation, they have the potential to threaten both integrity and commonness. It is one

thing, after all, to write fine songs for the countrier-than-thou and cult-party sets when they are all you can reach; it is another to be, of a sudden, able to touch exponents of their number, not all of whom appreciate extended metaphor or eight-minute stories.

Robert released his first Arista album, *Picnic*, in 1997, and its up-tempo single "Over the Waterfall" received enough airtime to rank number one on *Gavin's* Americana chart. An appearance on *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* followed and in weeks Robert and Kathleen saw more money than they had in entire years. The critical press was middling. Writers who had previously advanced Robert found some of *Picnic* overly arranged, which is to say that when his lyrics got buried under instrumentation and his drawl flattened to a narrow hum, the songs were less Robert Earl Keen songs and more

just songs, something akin to what played on the radio. Other critics, accustomed to an erratic-voiced storyteller, were tepid about the singer on *Picnic*, a singer often straining against his vocal range. "Over the Waterfall," they argued, was guilty of all said sins. Most writers averred, however, that other songs—"Shades of Gray," say, or the cover of "Levelland," superior in its restraint to James McMurtry's original—were among Robert's finest in musical and lyrical subtlety.

In popular music, the sort of success that *Picnic* enjoyed very nearly guarantees salubrious sales of the next album. *Walking Distance*, released in 1998, has not disappointed. It has also fared better with reviewers. Its songs are more elemental. Fiddles complement rather than struggle against guitars. The vocals—flawed, earnest—have returned to fore, and Robert narrates more often than sings, though perhaps still not in precise proportion to the dictates of his voice. But it is close—all of it is close, but for one large and, for Robert, anomalous excep-

tion: there and here, words go flaccid. A revitalizing sunrise is "just as good as gold." Growing up is "walking down that dusty trail." Hope is a force to "keep you from the cold." Rare are the two dollars in a weathered hand, the payment plans of a ruined homesteader, the LaSalle Hotel's steaming, greasy plate of enchiladas. As text, *Walking Distance* is a rough draft. It wants a scrupulous editor to transform cliché—the true but hurried—into considered clarity and random epiphany. Before, Robert had filled that job himself, and well.

Robert's latest works are too good, too average, too inventive, too orthodox, and ultimately too few to permit a firm conclusion about Arista's effect on him. They have, however, tentatively inverted his earlier problem. Where his Sugar Hill music was enigma to strangers and comfort to intimates, now it is intimates who are hard put to answer the question, Who is this man? ■



Keen at the Shiner Bocktoberfest, 1997