

Robert Earl Keen

Ready For Confetti

As singer/songwriter Robert Earl Keen has built a reputation as one of the nation's finest musical storytellers, he has been guided by several self-imposed rules and traditions that are often the antithesis of music industry standards.

It's a formula that has worked well for Keen since he began performing in 1981 and paving the way for a generation of songwriters and performers who make a living on the road. He paints musical portraits that are as vivid as sunsets over the great Southwest and stories that are as compelling and timeless as Cormac McCarthy novels. But what separates the Americana music pioneer from other songwriters is that he matches this lyrical literature with irresistible melodies, resulting in music that attracts thinkers and dancers alike. His songs are infused with such deep insight and humor that a new meaning and perspective is revealed with each listen, allowing his songs to grow more profound with time. That's why artists including George Strait, Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash, Lyle Lovett and the Dixie Chicks have chosen to record his songs over the years.

"For our generation of songwriters, he is the Townes Van Zandt, the songwriter's songwriter," says Randy Rogers, lead singer of the popular Randy Rogers Band. "I believe his place in the Hall of Fame is in stone. The places I have been fortunate enough to play all had Robert before anybody else. There was no scene until Robert created it. His formula works. Period."

It's because of Keen's confidence in his work that he had the courage to abandon his tried-and-true formula while making his new Lost Highway album and 16th release, *Ready for Confetti*. As a result, he has produced one of the finest albums of his career, and likely the most approachable one as well. He tackles such universal themes as losing love, living the best possible life and transcending this world into other spiritual realms.

Almost everything about *Ready for Confetti* is different for Keen, from some of the songs' shorter lengths (likely considered sacrilegious in the past) to the songs' topics and attitudes and his method of songwriting. "I always said that I never write on the road because it's too sterile and I'm too tired," says Keen, who wrote nine of the album's songs and co-wrote another with Dean Dillon. "Well, last year I just decided that we were going to throw that rule away and write on the road." Traditionally, he would spend three weeks at Scriptorium, his cabin on a hill, where he would write an entire album's worth of material. This time, writing whenever and wherever the mood struck allowed him to explore ideas as they developed while performing 180 shows a year and still complete the album within two years of 2009's *The Rose Hotel*, which reached the #1 position on the Americana Chart.

"I threw certain formulas totally out the window because I just don't always believe in convention as the best way to serve your purpose as far as singing songs that people enjoy," he says. "However, on this one I stuck to more concise ideas, more universal themes and more sing-able melodies. Consequently, it has somewhat more of a conventional sound than any of my records."

Indeed, he demonstrates on "Show the World" that he can write open and broad and happy. "It's truly how I feel about how we are in the world and how it has become a culture of anxiety and adversarial relationships, as opposed to turning the viewfinder a little bit one way or another to find a friendlier, warmer, more open world," he says.

With its clapping and tap-dancing rhythms, "I Gotta Go," one of the album's crown jewels, captures the rush that we all feel, even if our own lives bear little resemblance to the story line. "We are all on the go and we all have to go until we don't anymore," he says.

Keen also no longer felt the need to prove anything to himself as a songwriter, so he was able to just relax and follow wherever his creativity led.

"I'm an OK singer and an OK player and I'm an OK melody guy when it comes to making up a song," he says. "But I feel like my gift is my lyrics. They have always come easily for me and I've enjoyed it. When I was doing this record, I thought, 'I've done all that. I don't need to keep on provoking thought or making people want to sit up and listen to this. I really would like to write the best songs I can in the best way I can and let the songs speak for themselves.' So I sat down and really dropped my guard about how it needs to be different. I stuck to strumming my guitar and working in my mind toward lyrics that came easily and sang well and made sense."

This new approach came together for him in the song "Ready for Confetti," which was selected as the album's title because it reflects the approach of the entire project. "I was really driving for something clean and pretty," he says. "When I was able to complete that and make that happen, then I felt like that title reflected a new page or a new chapter in what I'm doing. I wanted it to feel bright and colorful and exciting and perhaps all new."

But like his previous works, the song is multi-dimensional. "It's about a couple of wacky people, and in the end I wrap it up with me being in that group living on the edge, the fringe people," he explains. "Their behavior indicates that it's a new day every day. But then if you open it up and peel back one of the layers of the onion, it says these people aren't just fringe people; they are crazy homeless people.

"So on the underbelly of the surface of this song, the confetti thing is really about seeing things differently than everybody else. That is where the true confetti is. But on the surface, the song is about waking up in a new day every day."

Fortunately for Keen's fans, old habits die hard, so he doesn't completely abandon his career-making ways. His biting sarcasm is unleashed on "The Road Goes On and On," a title that refers to his classic "The Road Goes On Forever." "I think that speaks for itself," he says. "I wrote this song. It answers a challenge, as far as I was concerned. I am answering it back."

“Paint the Town Beige” is his first re-recording of the country ballad that was featured on a studio album (*A Bigger Piece of Sky*). The original version, which emerged as an all-time fan favorite, was shrouded in numerous sounds and soaked in reverb and he wanted to create a clearer, cleaner version. “It fits me more now than when I wrote it,” he says.

He also covers Todd Snider’s “Play a Train Song,” both because he loved the song and Snider is one of his favorite entertainers. “I started picking around on that song and it really fit me. It just felt good. It does what my songs do for me: I can see every image exactly the same every time I see it.”

Words have been a constant in Keen’s life since the days before elementary school, when he started writing songs, and during college, when he studied English at Texas A&M and added music to his writing. After graduation he moved to Austin, where he worked as a newspaper reporter by day and musical performer at night. He released the studio album *West Textures* in 1989, when he already had secured his reputation as one of the most entertaining performers on the roadhouse circuit. (In fact, his live performances are so searing and memorable that he’s been asked to record six live albums.) The next studio album, 1993’s *A Bigger Piece of Sky*, was more popular and gained greater acclaim, as did 1994’s *Gringo’s Honeymoon* and several other albums, including the Top 10 smash *Gravitational Forces* in 2001.

Keen’s band has been with him nearly two decades and performed on every album since 1997’s *Picnic*. “I believe my players are as good as any players that there are,” he says “This is not just me. It’s a product of a band of almost 20 years and great friendship. If anything is going on here, it’s true love of music. It’s not trying to outdo everybody but trying to do the best you can with the talent that you have.”

This is the second Keen studio album produced by Lloyd Maines, who created the right attitude and spirit for each song while remaining true to Keen’s artistic vision. “I can honestly say I have never worked with a finer human being who has as much musical skill as well as people skill,” Keen says. “He is the one who sets the tone.” Maines was also the one who suggested that Keen cover the 1914 song “Soul of a Man,” which Keen occasionally performed acoustically and without microphones to end his shows. “It never fails. It is the favorite part of the whole show for everybody no matter how well we played,” he says. “I love the message: if you lead a good life, your spirit never dies.”