

ON THE ROAD  
FOR JAN 2010

First we had a path leading to the year 2000, and I was mashed up against a wall in the mob listening to Robert Earl Keen in Austin on New Year's Eve, December 31, 1999. We all survived that marker. Now we are heading to another marker, 2012, the end of the Mayan Calendar and the fulfillment of many global prophecies. All these events live in a story, and I have chosen mine! 2012 will mark the end of one level of consciousness and the beginning of another, perhaps a time when humans will realize the potential of transformation. And realize that each of us is the author of our story about everything.

Recently I gave a talk at Schreiner University on the poetry of Texas music, the stories these writers share with us about life and the distinct language they use. I asked Jacob Ames, son of Gordon and Denise, emcee of the Texas Music Coffeehouse and Schreiner student, to begin by sharing a song he wrote when visiting Italy and the story behind that song. I read the words, performing the meaning I understood there. Then Jacob sang the song he had written. I found the moment rich with interpretation. We were all present to our own story of what we were hearing.

From Jacob I moved on to some of my favorite songwriters, Guy Clark, Townes Van Zandt, Kinky Friedman, Billy Joe Shaver, Carolyn Wonderland, Cindy Walker, Terri Hendrix, Ruthie Foster, Shelley King, Blaze Foley, Susan Gibson, Willie Nelson, Walt Wilkins, and Robert Earl Keen. If you are reading this and live in the Texas Hill Country, you are familiar with these names. If you have ever visited Luckenbach or attended the Kerrville Folk Festival, you have been present during a performance. And if you read the newspaper, you keep up with Kinky Friedman who lives south of here off the Medina Highway.

My choice for this talk was based on words I love, people I know, and ready access to the songs. I am doing some research for a book on the poetry of Texas music but will need to meet the challenge of the rate publishers charge for reprinting lyrics. I have an idea! Each songwriter can just give me a handwritten page of the lyrics of the song, and I will then own that object and can use it in the book. We'll see. The American Music Association is hosting an auction of handwritten lyrics right now. Check out that website [www.americanamusic.org](http://www.americanamusic.org)

First, some terms that help us understand poetry. "Denotation" is the dictionary definition of a word. A wall is a structure that divides or encloses. "Connotation" is the emotional content of a word. A wall is an attitude or action that prevents closeness between two people. Metaphor is an implied comparison, and much writing depends on metaphor and symbol. I have found that when researching the life of the writer, reading interviews, then looking closely at the words chosen, my experience of the song is richer. And I can be totally affected by a song I do not understand at all.

Poetry began as song, contains lyrics (related to "lyrical") and relies on rhythm. Imagine the hunter returning with food, and the tribe gathering around a fire to dance and celebrate. Rhythm surrounds the universe as the earth circles the sun, the moon waxes and wanes, the animals breathe in and out. All is inhale/exhale. "We are swung to the beat of an infinite pendulum"(Untermeyer, 69). This tribal moment of sharing might be the origin of poetry. Humans sharing stories around a community fire.

And poetry has a communal spirit. Call and response, chanting, sing-alongs, church services, all acknowledge this call for community. Robert Earl Keen knows what it is like to have an entire audience singing along with him on some songs. I remember an evening in Bass Concert Hall in Ft. Worth where we were quietly listening and suddenly the song called for participation. One aspect of both poetry and song.

Greil Marcus said, “Dylan’s songs serve as metaphors, enriching our lives, giving us random insight into the myths we carry and the present we live, intensifying what we’ve known and leading us toward what we never looked for, while at the same time enforcing an emotional strength upon those perceptions by the power of music that moves with his words” ( ). Many of the songs by Texas songwriters fall into this description, and it is the poetry that is distinct in the song. One characteristic Texas

music, as it is discussed around the world as a specific genre, is the quality of the writing.

Storytelling (Keen, Clark, Kristofferson, Van Zandt, Shaver) is a trait of the Texas mythos. By the way, I am using the Greek origin of mythos, which means “plot or story.” Texas is, indeed, perceived in a mythic context worldwide. Untermeyer quoted an old dictionary in 1938, “The novel (film, song) is a subjective epic composition in which the author begs leave to treat the world according to his own point of view. It is only a question, therefore, whether he has a point of view. The rest will take care of itself”( ).

Keen calls “Feelin’ Good Again” the perfect homecoming song in his 2009 book with UT Press, “Robert Earl Keen: The Road Goes on Forever And The Party Never Ends.” I am thrilled that both my books of interviews with Texas songwriters and women are with the same press in the same Texas music series, The Brad and Michele Moore Roots Music Series.

Keen’s book contains 24 songs, notes, photos and scrapbook items related to each and an accompanying CD of printable sheet music for all the songs. Billy Joe Shaver, another Texas poet, has his autobiography with UT Press, “Honky Tonk Hero,” and the growth of appreciation for the literary quality found in Texas music is encouraged by a press that publishes these stories. Other university presses around the state have followed suit and are publishing academic books on varied aspects of Texas music.

Back to the poetry: Keen describes a perfect homecoming, while Willie Nelson shares a feeling with us in “Still is Still Moving To Me.” The double usage of the word “still” creates a sense of mystery as we listen to the line repeated over and over.

“And it’s hard to explain how I feel/It won’t go in words, but I know that it’s real. I can be moving or I can be still/But still is still moving to me.” And the juxtaposition of two opposites (oxymoron in a glossary of poetic terms), “still moving,” and the use of still as several parts of speech, gives the song a way to be heard with no boundaries, rather the experience of swimming in the sea, both still and moving at the same time. I love this kind of mystery in the writing.

Billy Joe Shaver reminds us, “But I’ll always be around/Just like the songs I leave behind me/I’m gonna live forever now.” His song, “Live Forever,” gives us advice, “Be good to one another,” and hope, “Remember someone really loves you.” Hear the poetry?

Robert Frost said “A living poem begins with a lump in the throat...a home-sickness or love-sickness. It is a reaching out toward expression, an effort to find fulfillment. A complete poem is one where an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found the words.” Terri Hendrix tells us what she would do, if she had a daughter. The poetry of the song includes metaphors (peaks and valleys in life), personification (fate tackles you),

poetic language (feed her soul, dance with her curves) as she addresses a sociological issue: how women perceive themselves in the face of this culture.

Robert Frost says, "Poetry is what gets lost in translation." Can't translate "Sold American" by Kinky Friedman. How do you translate "Roulette eyes reflecting another morning lost" or "The lonely night is mourning for the death it never dies"? And we experience the poetry as we hear that song.

I am sharing a few perspectives on the poetry of Texas music as we begin this new year. Let me hear your stories about songs. Your favorite words. Remember the coffeehouse series produced by the THMF and Schreiner University the first Wednesday of February (Clifton Fifer and friends), March (Shelley King), and April (Spoken Word with Thom the world Poet). Tim Hazell will be artist in residence March 22-26, and Gabriele Rico is our featured writer on April 22. Mark your calendars! Ils sont parties. KH

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