

Terry Allen by Clinton Krute

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“Making music work to the lyric, and making the lyric work to the note.”



All images courtesy of Paradise of Bachelors.

Artist and singer-songwriter Terry Allen’s haunting 1975 album, *Juarez*, is a gothic story of the American Southwest—and not totally unlike something out of Cormac McCarthy or the early Westerns of Monte Hellman (who included an Allen song in his classic *Two-Lane Blacktop*). Comparisons to novels and films seem natural, as the album builds a coherent and complex narrative, with Allen’s rollicking piano and spare arrangements underpinning an elliptical tale of violence, sex, and “writing on rocks across the USA.” *Juarez* tells us of the murder of a sailor and his new bride, a Mexican prostitute, by the “pachuco” Jabo and his companion, an artist/witch/“rock-writer” named Chic Blundie, in the southwestern Colorado town of Cortez. Not quite country and not quite rock, the

music of *Juarez* is as unique as the man himself. Allen's voice is incredible; he shifts from mellow Texas drawl—a more nasal Randy Newman—to bloodcurdling intensity from line to line. Against the darkness of the material, Allen's singing and songcraft manage to convey humor and warmth, elevating the story and music out of the realm of pulp.



Allen grew up in Lubbock, Texas before leaving the Southwest for LA where he enrolled in the Chouinard Art Institute, the precursor of CalArts, graduating in 1966. There, he studied conceptual art, painted, played in a cover band that opened for Arthur Lee and Love, and made work with friends like Allen Ruppertsberg. Though his mother was a musician and he grew up listening to Jimmy Reed and Hank Williams play at his father's dancehall, Allen is first and foremost a visual artist—though I doubt he'd draw such clear distinctions between the various aspects of his work. *Juarez*, the album, is just one element of the *JAUREZ* project, and the story of Sailor, Alice, Chic, and the Pachuco has also manifested as a series of prints and paintings, installations, an unproduced screenplay, and as a radio play co-produced by David Byrne. Terry Allen is multi-talented, and for him, it's all just art.

Though he's lived in Santa Fe for many years, Terry spoke to me from Austin, Texas, where he and his wife, actress Jo Harvey Allen, were visiting family. We spoke about growing up in the Southwest, going to art school, and the May 20 reissue of *Juarez* from Paradise of Bachelors, complete with facsimiles of the original prints that accompanied the album. We also discussed Terry's other '70s masterpiece, the 1979 double LP *Lubbock (on Everything)*, which will be reissued in the fall, and how memory and sense of place are woven into his work.

Clinton Krute Hi Terry. Are in you Santa Fe?

Terry Allen I'm in Austin right now actually. We got a place here. Lubbock is about half way, about 12, 14 hours max if you go straight through, but we usually stop overnight there and that makes it easy.

CK You still have family in Lubbock?

TA My wife does, she's got cousins and one uncle left there, but all my family is gone. All the family going backwards is gone. All my family is forward.

CK So looking backward, when did music first become a way that you wanted to express yourself or create art?

TA Well, my dad, Sled Allen, was a baseball player. He was born in 1886, so he was about 60 years old when I was born, and my mother was about 40. She was kind of an itinerant musician who had travelled all over the place by the time I was born, and I was an only child, so it was more like a space landing than a birth for them.

My dad, even though he always saw himself as a ballplayer, had bought an old defunct foursquare gospel church space in Lubbock and started throwing dances on Friday and Saturday nights. That kind of grew, and he got a wrestling promotership and started doing boxing and all kinds of indoor sports. It gradually grew into a pretty thriving business.

But when he first started out, on Friday nights he would have all-black dances—Texas was heavily segregated at that time. He had great people, great touring bands, people like T-Bone Walker and Jimmy Reed.

CK Wow.

TA All the great travelling bands at the time. The Saturday Night Jamboree was all-white Country—Hank Williams, Jimmy Dickens, all those people. From the time I was a little kid in the late '40s, I worked down there serving “setups.” We had these cardboard buckets for ice and limes and cokes, so people bought the bottles and mixed their own drinks under the table. I grew up hearing this music. At the time, I wasn't aware really how fertile and incredible that was, and how incredible those performers were.

And like I said, my mother was a piano player. One of her last gigs was actually at the La Fonda hotel in Santa Fe. We drove from Lubbock for gigs and she'd make me sleep in the booth in the bar while she did her job, then put me back in the car and drive back to Lubbock.

CK (laughter)

TA So I grew up around that aspect of music. Old musicians, old friends of hers who she'd played with were always coming by. The same with my dad. Old ball players

would come visit and parties would kind of break out at the drop of a hat, with both of them.

So music was always a part of my life. But, I guess my interest in making music didn't fully surface until rock 'n' roll first hit that part of the world like an atomic bomb.



CK You have a lot of songs that refer to that period. I'm thinking of "The Pink and Black Song" from Lubbock (on Everything) specifically—are those songs autobiographical to a certain extent?

TA They're not autobiographical, no. There are a couple I wrote specifically for Jo Harvey, my wife, but most of them are just an attempt to capture a climate, a personality, a person, or an atmosphere. There's a song on Lubbock called "The Great

Joe Bob,” which is about a football player gone bad. Joe Bob, he's really a composite of people that I remember in high school—but it's almost all iconic too. I've got a drawer full of clippings people sent me with that same story from just about every state. That idea of a high school football hero going bad and ending up in the can is kind of a classic American story.

CK Right. That's a great song.

TA I suppose everything is autobiographical in terms of sentience and memory—but I didn't set out to do autobiography, though a song can be a biography of a place or a climate.

CK A portrait of that time and place. So then you left Lubbock and went to art school in LA. Were you one of the only kids from Lubbock who took off in that direction?

TA Well, I actually went with a friend of mine who ended up being an animator. He ended up going to another art school, but we went out together. Most of the people of my generation went and became musicians, but there were a lot of people from Texas out there in LA. I think at one time there was a house with about 43 people from Lubbock in it.

CK All from the same high school?

TA Yeah. Half the people I knew, though they were all a little bit younger than me. I left before they did.

Guy Clark was out there at the time, too. I didn't know him back then, but Guy was working in the Dobro factory at the same time we were out there. Also, Delbert McClinton had come out and signed with the same record company I ended up signing with, called Clean Records, which was a part of Atlantic Records. The great thing about Clean Records, the only good thing about Clean Records, was that every man had to have a clean record.

CK (laughter) Did they do a background check before you signed the contract?

TA Well, they should have looked in the mirror.

CK So they folded quick and everything got—

TA Well, I wined up signing a very stupid contract with them, which tied my music up for a long time, and nothing happened. I think Delbert and Glen Clark did a record, and that was about the only thing that came out from Clean Records. I did have a song I recorded for them in a movie called Two Lane Blacktop.

CK Yeah that's one of my favorite movies, actually.

TA Is it really?

CK Yeah, it's a great movie.

TA Yeah, I like that movie a lot, too. That was pretty incredible because they set it up for me to sing and to record with Don Everly and James Burton, who was Elvis's guitar player at the time

CK Wow. And Ricky Nelson. He's on so many great records.

TA Yeah. Those were the two people that I played with. Of course, it was only on for about ten seconds in the movie. But anyway. It was the first thing that I ever had that was out in the world.

CK That's pretty remarkable. When you signed this contract with Clean Records and were writing songs, were you thinking that you'd have a career in the pop music industry, or were you already thinking about how you might integrate this into your practice as a visual artist?

TA At the time, I was still wanting to get a studio and make art. When I really started to write songs, I was more concerned with how to do it—how to make a song, how to make a painting, how to make whatever it was I was doing at the time. I wasn't really thinking in terms of making an album. I was trying to get work shown in some galleries, but the line between visual art and music to me closed very fast—they informed one another so much.

I've always used music in my installations. My songs are also highly visual, so there's always that cross-thinking going on with my work. So I've never thought of it so much so as trying to do a record every year, or every two years, or having any kind of music career in that sense. The Clean Records experience made it clear to me that I didn't

want to get involved with record companies as much as I just wanted to do music and write music. And if I did it, I was going to have to do it myself.

I did have a little support though. Lowell George was a big help to me and very generous. He really liked “New Delhi Freight Train,” and ended up recording it on Time Loves a Hero. He never asked for any royalties, but I did give him a drawing. The only way I could pay anyone in those days was the barter system.

CK I've heard that a lot of people find playing with you to be an interesting experience, because your sense of timing kind of shifts according to the needs of the song.

TA (laughter) Yeah. I think probably the shift in meter and time that I've always had—other than just a natural incompetence—came from playing a long time and writing a lot just totally by myself. I didn't play with that many musicians really until I cut Lubbock. That was the first time I really played with a band since I was in a cover band in art school, a blues band.

I think my sense of timing kind of came out of just building a song—came out of that thing of being alone and making music work to the lyric, and making the lyric work to the note without concerning myself with following any of the rules of measures and beats, which I didn't know any way.

CK That makes me think about the way the songs flow into each other on Juarez. The structure of the album is kind of nebulous, the narrative itself—sometimes you can pick it up, and sometimes it disappears. I'm wondering how you conceived of this group of songs. How did this narrative come together?

TA It came together at the same time as a whole body of visual work I was working on. The story itself kind of built over a period of time. It's kind of a mystery to me, because it really came out of nowhere. I never thought of the characters as people so much as climate conditions in constant motion, colliding with one another. So it was abstract in that sense. When I wrote a screenplay of Juarez, I could never think of it as a movie, for just that reason—I could never see faces on these people. They were always just these entities so the screenplay was just about places and moods, like seeing the tail end of a car or a motorcycle going over a hill. But it was all sensory. It wasn't about interaction between characters. In the visual work there are no images of people either.

In Juarez, there is a sailor, there is a whore, there is a pachuco, and there's this kind of witch character, but they're all shifting identities all the time. That's one reason I think the piece, for me, has continued to yield new meanings over the years. I've worked on it as a theatre piece, I've worked on it as a radio show, I've built it as installation—it's gone through all of these different identities over time, more than anything else I've ever done.

Juarez was the first time this happened to me—it happens sometimes now—when I'll think I'm working on two or three songs separately, and then I'll play all three together and realize they're one song.

CK So did you think of this collection of songs as a single narrative, or were they more fragments you pulled together, which the narrative emerged out of? How did you turn them into an album?



TA I never thought of the songs as part of an album while I was writing them. I thought it was more like a literary work than anything else, but I wasn't even sure about that. It wasn't until I started showing images of the visual works with tapes of the songs playing in appropriate places, that the idea of an album came about. Jack Lemmon in Chicago —who ran Landfall Press, a lithograph print shop—said, “Why don't we do a suite of prints and a record? We'll put these songs in the box with the prints.” That sounded like a really good idea to me, so that's how the record got made. I think they did an edition of 50, then we pressed another thousand copies of just the LP without the prints.

It was never about trying to make and sell a record. We didn't send them in to radio stations or promote it. I sold them at gigs, literally out of the back seat of the car.

CK So were you playing gigs in California at the time?

TA I was doing art-related gigs, presentations and performances at museums and galleries. It wasn't until after Lubbock that we started playing in clubs. I'd play a club one night with the same band, and the same set on the next night at a museum. It's always very interesting how the different crowds related to what you were doing.

CK Did it go over pretty good with the museum crowds?

TA Well, it was funny because in the club the people respond directly to what it is, y'know? They dance or they howl or they do whatever, but it's direct. In a museum, because of the context, people seem to sit back and wait and try to figure out what they're supposed to think about it. And sometimes they don't figure that out until it's over. But that's not totally generous either, because a lot of the museum people really responded to the music.

CK Juarez really seems to be about evoking a sense of place. The whole story is set in three different places: Southern California, Cortez, and Juarez, a triangle that covers a pretty definitive portion of the American Southwest.

TA Yeah, it starts out in the Tijuana-San Diego-LA area. The sailor and the whore meet in Tijuana, and then everybody heads to Cortez.

CK Right, of all places. That's always been interesting to me, because I actually grew up not far from Cortez.

TA Oh did you? My grandfather used to live there. He was a shoemaker, a cobbler, in Cortez. In the early '50s, late '40s, I would go spend some time with him in the summer. From the time I was a little kid that word—Cortez—I would go down the sidewalk repeating it, “Cortez, Cortez, Cortez.” It had some kind of weird impact on me. I don't think I've ever talked to anybody who was from there.



One of nine lithographs accompanying the original 1975 boxed LP edition of *Juarez*. Hand-pulled by Jack Lemmon at Landfall Press, 1975–76, 12 x 12 inches.

CK It's a strange place in my memory too. It's near Mesa Verde, so that loomed large in my imagination as a kid. I remember once there was a prison break and shootout near Cortez, and we were supposed to keep an eye out for the escaped convicts.

TA There's some kind of focal point of violence for some reason. I remember it wasn't too long ago there was some kind of big shootout in Cortez.

CK Yeah I remember that, a couple of years ago.

TA I always thought it was really interesting that Cortez was in Montezuma County. It has the same historical implication that some of the songs dealt with—these historical reversals with Cortez and Mexico. Ship Rock is near there, too—that whole area that runs from Cortez down to Highway 66, which has changed a lot now.

CK Ship Rock, New Mexico...

TA I always thought that was really wicked—just metaphorically really wicked.

CK Yeah. It's where the mountains and the green fields end, coming south from Colorado. Then you hit the desert and it's just totally dry, with these strange alien rock formations cropping out.

TA Yeah, and real scarred.

CK There are a lot of Indian Reservations down there as well. It's an interesting place. So when you recorded Juarez, did the gallery set up the recording?

TA No, I recorded it in San Francisco at Wally Heider Studios. At the time the Jefferson Airplane/Starship had one of the main studios, and they just leased it 24 hours a day. My cousin was the road manager for them, so I called him and told him what I wanted to do. He set it up, and I borrowed 500 bucks, and Jack Lemmon and the press got 500bucks, and then I traded prints and drawings to my cousin and with other musicians and everybody else that was involved over that thousand bucks.

We cut it in the morning. All the bands would record at night, most of the afternoons, and then straight through the night, so the morning was the only time it was available. There was one engineer, so we cut the basic tracks over a period of about three or four days in all. Then we brought in Peter Kaukonen and Greg Douglass, who overdubbed their string parts on it, and Diane Harris came in and sang. I remember we stayed up all night, so we'd feel like we were recording late when we were there in the morning.

CK Were you living in the Bay Area when you were recording it?

TA I was living in Fresno at that time. The only time I lived in the Bay Area was when I taught at Berkeley in the art department as a guest lecturer in the early '70s. That job stuck for about six years.

But that was kind of my home base, Fresno. From 1970 to about '87. We went from Fresno to Santa Fe. When I say we live somewhere, wherever we live, we pretty much just get mail there. When we lived in Fresno I had a studio there, but I was on the road with all kinds of projects. So was my wife, who's a writer and actress.

CK After you recorded and released Juarez, was there any reaction? How did things develop after that?

TA I think it travelled by word of mouth. It got some good reviews, but nobody could get it because we had no idea how to distribute anything. People were calling up and we'd send them a record, but we pretty much had no clue what to do with them otherwise. I didn't want to spend a lot of time trying to figure it out, and Landfall didn't either, so we just went home.

I played gigs and did shows and gallery shows, then we did Lubbock, which came out in 1979. I think Lubbock was a little more accessible, and we really did the whole thing that time, and Lubbock actually sold.

For Juarez we had to form a record company called Fate records, and Fate released Lubbock, and every record I did until Sugar Hill licensed all my stuff in 1990.

CK You've re-recorded a lot of songs from Juarez throughout your later records. Were you unhappy with how those original recordings turned out or did these songs just keep coming back?

TA I was very happy with the way they turned out—it's just that I was so broke at the time, and there were so many ideas I wanted to try on those songs, using more instrumentation to see how they worked. I remember Dylan had a record that I like called Live at Budokan, and he did a lot of his old songs in totally different, almost unrecognizable arrangements. I liked the idea of doing that. And working with the musicians that I've worked with, I just wanted to try those songs with them. I still play them, and we still play different versions of them.

CK You've never really had any visual component or installation work that was as intimately associated with the songs on Lubbock as you did for Juarez.

TA No, I never did. I did a series of drawings when we did the record release at Stubb's Barbecue—which is a great barbecue joint—and I did a little show of drawings that I call Lubbock (on Everything), but that was never the kind of visual thing that Juarez was. But those songs have shown up in installations and in different areas of my work in the past, but not in way that was specifically related to the album. Lubbock was already on everything. (laughter)

CK Yeah, it's a standalone piece in its own right. It seems like it's intended to be a kind of portrait of your memories of Lubbock, is that right?

TA Yeah, I just think it's about that part of the world at that particular time. I think some of those towns haven't changed that much, and those people haven't changed that much, even though a lot of accessories have. But it's still hard back there. And there are still pretty interesting people in Lubbock.

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