

THE NEW YORKER

POP NOTES

TERRY TOWN

BY BEN GREENMAN

MARCH 4, 2013

Though Terry Allen's newest album, "**Bottom of the World**" (TLA), is his first in fourteen years, he's been plenty busy: tending to his career as a visual artist, staging theatrical adaptations of his earlier records, and even publishing a retrospective book about his long career. In one sense, "Bottom of the World" picks up where his last album, "Salivation," left off, offering his indelibly original take on outlaw country. In another sense, it reaches back even further into the past, to his 1975 *début*, "Juarez."



"Juarez," originally designed as a companion piece to a visual work and printed in a private pressing of a thousand copies, was a series of beguilingly off-kilter songs about Texas, California, and Mexico, held together by spoken interludes that gave it the feel of a movie. The record was performed primarily by Allen on piano; its closest cousin in pop music is probably "Johnny Cutler's Birthday," Randy Newman's original demo of "Gold Old Boys." "Juarez" launched Allen as a recording artist, and his subsequent records—including the 1979 double album "Lubbock (On Everything)"—had a more expansive sonic palette and a larger cast of collaborators. "Bottom of the World" opts for simplicity, using mainly acoustic instruments, including cello and mandolin. As always, Allen's songs extract strangeness from the known world and use it as a means of acquiring greater knowledge. "Hold on to the House" is about sex or the real-estate market or both. "Wake of the Red Witch" employs the 1948 John Wayne sea picture of the same name as the basis for a deeply personal meditation on art's escapist powers. Other songs ("Emergency Human Blood Courier," "Do They Dream of Hell in Heaven") deliver what their titles promise: existentialism and eschatology, filtered through Allen's wry sense of humor. Two of the strongest tracks are retreads. The wrenching "Queenie's Song," co-written with Guy Clark and repurposed from Clark's 2002 album, "The Dark," was inspired by the shooting death of Allen's dog; and "Four Corners," originally on "Juarez," remains one of Allen's finest moments, a trip through the emotional geography of the American West. Its earlier incarnation was sharp, sometimes sardonic. Now Allen sings more softly—not tentatively, exactly, but carefully. It's an old man's confirmation of a young man's speculation, which is as good a definition of wisdom as any. ♦

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