

## Terry Allen Resurrects Iconic Concept Album 'Juarez'

Hear the groundbreaking LP's reissue, featuring haunting story songs whose characters have lived well beyond the music

By [James Sullivan](#) May 16, 2016



Terry Allen first released 'Juarez,' which has been called the greatest concept album of all time, in 1975. James Bland Photography

Terry Allen, painter, sculptor, writer and musician, was once asked his definition of art. He thought a moment and replied, "To get out of town."

Though Lubbock, Texas, where he grew up, was home to Buddy Holly and Waylon Jennings, Allen still couldn't wait to get the hell out. Inspired by "On the Road" and rock & roll, he hit the highway, attending art school in L.A., then teaching at Berkeley and in Fresno. But wherever he roamed, he just couldn't get the High Plains of Texas off his mind.

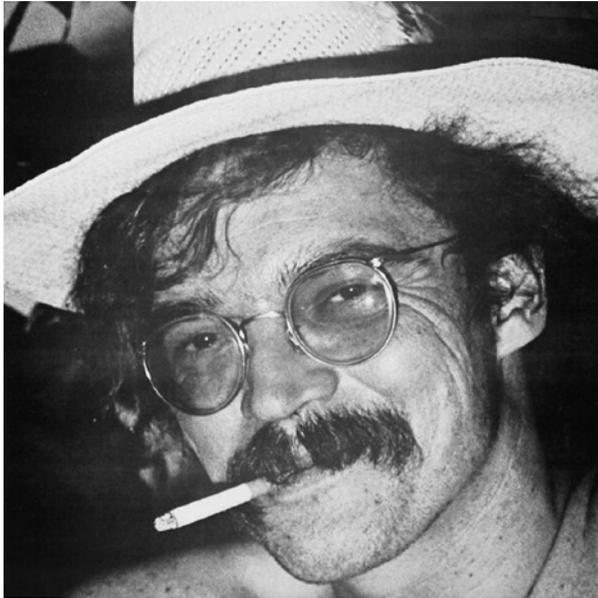
He was "haunted," as he has often said, by a small group of tragic characters that grew in his imagination. He made art about them, wrote songs about them. Given the opportunity, he cut an album by the seat of his pants about them. The first edition numbered 50. It was 1974.

More than 40 year later, Allen is still haunted by Sailor, Spanish Alice, Jabo and Chic, the star-crossed couples of *Juarez*, a concept album that has often been called an outlaw classic. To Allen, it's nothing more than a bunch of strange saloon songs, and nothing less than the centerpiece of his life's work. *Juarez* is being reissued this week in a deluxe set, with reprinted paintings and photos and insightful essays (including one by Dave Hickey), on the Paradise of Bachelors label. [Hear the full album below.]

When Allen first wrote his story in a fever dream, he had no idea it would live on for most of his own lifetime. The record, in and out of print, has inspired a stage show, a radio play, collaborations with David Byrne and more.

"It kind of snuck out of the ooze," Allen says with a laugh. When the proprietor of a small press in Chicago offered to package a set of Allen's lithographs with an LP, he lined up a few mornings of studio time at Wally Heider's in San Francisco. His cousin was road manager at the time for Jefferson Airplane, who kept space in the studio.

"We stayed up all night so we wouldn't feel like we'd just woken up," Allen says of the cheap, unwanted times he booked. He put up \$500, and the Chicago publisher matched it.



One thing the *Juarez* story stood little chance of becoming, surprisingly enough, was a movie, he says. That's because he could never envision the characters as people.

"I couldn't see their faces. I always thought of them as climates, moving across geography, crashing into one another. They were just like these ghosts moving through space."

Allen has recorded several more records since the 1979 release of his second classic, the double album *Lubbock (on everything)*, which Paradise of Bachelors will reissue later this year. As an artist, his work is featured in the collections of MoMA, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, LACMA and other prestigious institutions. As a sculptor, he has installed public (and sometimes controversial) art in San Francisco, San Diego and Kansas City, to name a few. Inevitably, though, he'll always return to *Juarez*.

Allen has lived for years in Santa Fe with his wife, actress Jo Harvey Allen (who played the Lying Woman in Byrne's film *True Stories*, claiming she wrote most of Elvis's songs). They recently took a second home in Austin,

where their two sons live. One's a musician, the other's an artist: "Epic double fuck-up," Allen says, laughing.

For a time he and Jo Harvey owned an old whorehouse in Marfa, Texas, but the drive from Santa Fe proved too grueling.

"We'd sit on the porch and say, 'We'll never get rid of this place,'" says Allen. "Then halfway back to Santa Fe we'd say, 'We've got to get rid of that place.'"

The Allens have been married for 53 years. ("Shows how long two people can misunderstand each other," he jokes.) She's from Lubbock too, so in a sense, they've never really left.

As a boy, Allen worked for tips in his father's dancehalls, selling "setups" – ice, lemons, Cokes – to customers who brought in their own booze. Old Sled Allen was a former ballplayer, making the major leagues with the St. Louis Browns way back in 1910. In Lubbock, he ran an arena where he promoted boxing and wrestling and booked black performers on Friday nights, whites on Saturday. Terry Allen saw a steady stream of future legends – Hank Williams, Ernest Tubb, John Lee Hooker, B.B. King – on his father's stage.

Sled Allen was 72 when he died in 1959. He'd been nearly 60 by the time he had his only son. His own father had served in the Civil War.

"It's mind-boggling – shows you how close that history really is," says Allen, who just turned 73 himself.

Though *Juarez* has been compared to Willie Nelson's *Red Headed Stranger* as one of the great country concept albums, Allen has little interest in any kind of movement, "outlaw" or otherwise. He's always followed his own road. Grim, funny, epic and intimate all at once, *Juarez* belongs in a genre unto itself.

"I have been called so many types of artist and songwriter, it just doesn't mean anything," he says. "It's about what you do. You call it what it is."

There is one thing you might call this record: timeless.