

Cult heroes: Terry Allen – country music outlaw and renaissance man. The Texas-born artist's work is found in the Museum of Modern Art and he's creating a sculpture from Nashville legend Guy Clark's ashes, but his reissued 1970s concept album might be his greatest work of art

Garth Cartwright

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When it was announced recently that [the late Texan troubadour Guy Clark](#) had specified in will that his ashes be given to one Terry Allen for incorporation into a sculpture, many Clark fans must have wondered two things: why? And who the hell is Terry Allen?

The 73-year-old Texan is a noted country singer-songwriter and a [renowned visual artist](#). Allen and Clark, who met on tour, were friends for decades, and they wrote a few songs together. Yet where Clark never wavered from writing songs and touring, Allen has concentrated on creating conceptual sculptures. Clark, whose late wife, Susanna, was a painter, was fascinated by Allen's sculptures. In his will, Clark commanded Allen to turn his ashes into art. That's the kind of poetic farewell Clark's fans might have expected. Allen's fans, meanwhile, might consider the gesture as drily humorous as one of his songs – several of which concern art and the art world.

Clark's request attracted plenty of media attention in the US, with [Rolling Stone making it a lead news story](#). As it happens, Allen's long-unavailable 1975 debut album, *Juarez*, has [just been reissued](#). By 1975, Allen was a trained architect, a widely exhibited painter and – having issued his debut 45 in 1967 and contributed a song to the cult road movie *Two Lane Blacktop* in 1971 – had plenty of music biz experience.

Juarez is a remarkable album in every sense. It began as *The Juarez Suite*, a series of lithographs that chronicled the haunting story of Sailor, Spanish Alice, Jabo and Chic Blundie as they travel from San Diego and Los Angeles to Ciudad Juárez, via a bloody detour through Cortez, Colorado, and their sordid adventures in the US-Mexico borderlands. When Allen toured his art to galleries across the US, he would perform songs he had written that hinted at the narrative in the lithographs. In 1974 the specialist art publisher Landfall Press issued a *Juarez* box set featuring the lithographic prints and an LP of Allen's songs.

Those aware of Allen's musical talent – and he was already keyed in to the [outlaw country](#) scene in Los Angeles and Texas – have praised *Juarez*. But a country concept album detailing graphic sex and violence – sung in a cracked voice that emphasised droll absurdities – was never going to get a deal from a Nashville record label. Allen set up Fate Records to distribute *Juarez* and his subsequent records until 1996, when his cult status led to a deal with the leading bluegrass label Sugar Hill (not the rap label of the same name) to reissue his catalogue and distribute his new albums.

As with the Velvet Underground's debut album, *Juarez* sold few copies, but those who heard it were often inspired. Among Allen's many fans are David Byrne (Allen appeared in his movie *True Stories*), the late Lowell George (whose band Little Feat would record Allen's [New Delhi Freight Train](#) in 1977), [Emmylou Harris](#), [Ryan Bingham](#), [Lucinda Williams](#) and, of course, Guy Clark. Listening to the fractured narrative and Allen's willingness to employ surrealist tropes as he bends and shifts the dark Americana narrative leads me to wonder if Tom Waits and David Lynch ever owned copies. Inevitably, Allen has been called "the godfather of alt-country", but he's never been interested in being labelled.

The reissue of *Juarez*, on LP and CD, is a beautiful package containing reproductions of the original *Juarez Suite* lithographs and a series of essays, including ones by Dave Alvin of [the Blasters](#) and the US art critic Dave Hickey, that explain Allen's aesthetic as a musician and artist. Guy Clark said of Allen: "I like Terry. He's a funny son of a bitch." And he wasn't wrong: these wry songs are delivered by a singer who sounds like a wisecracker. (Later this year, Allen's second album, 1979's *Lubbock (On Everything)*, also gets a deluxe reissue.)

Allen recorded regularly during the 80s and 90s, issuing six albums of new material over 19 years before taking a 14-year break. He returned in 2013 with the excellent *Bottom of the World*. He still plays out – in bars, concert halls and also galleries – with his sons now in the band, but hasn't performed in the UK for more than a decade. Allen records and performs sparingly today, because his art has gained increasing stature in the US over recent decades. In fact, many public and private collections own his sculptures and his work has even made it into New York's Museum of Modern Art. This is likely to salve any hurt he feels about being ignored by the [Country](#) Music Hall of Fame. "People tell me it's country music," says Allen, "and I ask, 'Which country?'"