

# TexasMonthly

## There and Back Again

Jan 2017 – by Jason Cohen

In 1962 Terry Allen left Lubbock to pursue what he couldn't imagine ever happening in his hometown: a life as an artist. More than fifty years later, the sculptor, painter, playwright, and musician behind *Juarez* and *Lubbock (On Everything)* is ready for a return.



Terry Allen, photographed in Austin, in November 2016. Photograph by Leann Mueller

The guide leading incoming freshmen around Texas Tech University on the first Saturday of 2016's college-football season didn't look as though he'd been on campus longer than one academic year himself, but he had his patter down. As the group moved from the library to the student union, he pointed out a work commissioned by the school's public art program and installed in 2003: a hominid-like bronze figure cast entirely from books. While all the students call it "Bookman," the sculpture's formal title is a play on the university's Red Raiders nickname: *Read Reader*. And there's a second pun in Bookman's anatomical construction. "His spine is made out of actual book spines," the guide observed, before offering his own interpretation of the work. "He's running to the library to cram for his test. But he's probably going to fail, because he's reading a website."

What the collegiate docent didn't mention was the sculptor, a not-insignificant omission. Bookman sprung from the mind and hands of Lubbock native and one-semester Texas Tech dropout Terry Allen, who is arguably the first of Lubbock's legendary post-hippie semi-country singer-songwriters. Allen's first two albums, 1975's *Juarez* and 1979's *Lubbock (on everything)*, are as canonical to hard-core Texas music fans as Townes Van Zandt's *Live at the Old Quarter, Houston, Texas* and Willie Nelson's *Red Headed Stranger*, even those who

don't know Allen's music firsthand have probably heard his song "Amarillo Highway," which has been covered by the likes of Bobby Bare, Robert Earl Keen, and Sturgill Simpson. As large as Allen looms over Texas music, however, he is even more revered as a visual and multimedia artist: his paintings, sculptures, and installations—which can be found everywhere from New York City's Museum of Modern Art and Los Angeles's Museum of Contemporary Art to the DFW and Houston airports—have earned him both national and international recognition.

Allen hasn't lived in Lubbock in more than fifty years, but there are traces of him all over the city. Some are ghosts: the former wrestling arenas and music halls once run by his father, promoter Sled Allen; the dirt-road childhood home that is now an insurance office on busy Thirty-fourth Street; the grassy lot that was the first site of Caldwell Studios, where Allen and what he would dub the Panhandle Mystery Band recorded *Lubbock (on everything)*. Some are literal monuments, like Allen's likeness of the late Christopher B. "Stubb" Stubblefield, the Lubbock meat master and music-scene patron turned barbecue-sauce figurehead, which looms over the otherwise abandoned site of the original Stubb's Bar-B-Q. There are also the plaques on the West Texas Walk of Fame, which has inducted both Terry and his wife, the actress and writer Jo Harvey Allen.

What the tour guide couldn't have known is that Allen was just a few hundred feet away, in the basement of the library, on that same college-football Saturday. He was in town, first of all, to mix audio in the university's Crossroads Recording Studio for a DVD of a concert he had played earlier that year at the student union building's Allen Theatre. The show, held in February, had kicked off a 2016 that had also featured luxe, elaborately annotated reissues of *Juarez* and *Lubbock (on everything)*, as well as fanfare over Texas Tech's plans to create something called the Allen Collection. The name of the theater was a coincidence (it honors the school's first dean of student life, James G. Allen), but the name of the collection was not: the Allens had agreed to donate sixty-plus years of journals, tapes, blueprints, sketches, and photographs to the university, to be housed as a "living archive." The couple weren't interested in socking their life's work away in acid-free cardboard boxes, to be checked in and out of a humidity-controlled room by the occasional biographer or academic; they envisioned a shape-shifting gallery that would host classes, fellowships, residencies, and research devoted to the creative process. Perhaps to the chagrin of some at Texas Tech, Allen prefers to call this collection "The Center for Unlearning."

Inside the recording studio, Allen sat in front of a computer monitor, scrutinizing footage of the concert, for which he and most of the original Panhandle Mystery Band—as well as his sons, Bukka and Bale, and special guests Keen and Delbert McClinton—had performed *Lubbock (on everything)* live in its entirety for the first time since its recording, as part of Tech's annual Lubbock Lights concert series. A genial but imposing figure—mostly pepper hair, black long-sleeved buttoned shirt, black jeans, and desert-beaten cowboy boots—Allen has the slightly hunched bearing of someone who has loomed over a piano or a drafting table for the better part of his 73 years. As the studio's engineer worked the audio board, Allen read from, or made notations in, a small Moleskine notebook and offered the occasional instruction or request. On the monitor, Allen's concert self played the opening notes of "The Beautiful Waitress," a wistfully funny greasy-spoon-crush song (today's titular character would be a barista). The song ends with a based-on-a-true-story monologue about art, detailing the waitress's fondness for horses and the difficulty she had drawing them. "Said she could do the body okay, but never get the head, tail, or legs," narrated Allen onstage. "I told her she was drawing sausages, not horses. She said no, they were horses." Allen in the studio laughed.

He and Jo Harvey had driven in from Santa Fe, where they've lived since 1987. Two nights earlier, they'd dined with Texas Tech president Lawrence Schovanec to discuss ideas for the Allen Collection, and that night they would watch the Red Raiders' game against the Stephen F. Austin Lumberjacks from Chancellor Robert Duncan's stadium box. The couple had plans to continue on to Austin, where their sons and a few grandsons live, but before leaving, Allen had agreed to give me a bit of a Lubbock memory tour, with drive-by looks at his old haunts, as well as the city's tallest building (the former Great Plains Life skyscraper, which famously survived a 1970 tornado), the American Wind Power Center, and the State Theater, where Buddy Holly got the idea for "That'll Be the Day" while watching *The Searchers*.

We clambered into his truck, a big, gleaming-white Ford F-150, and set off, heading first to Stubb's memorial and the Panhandle South Plains Fairgrounds. A medal of Saint Christopher, a holdover from previous trucks, hung on the rearview mirror; the console held a larger notebook, one of hundreds Allen has filled over the

years, in many colors, styles, and sizes: plain black sketchbooks, Italian leather-bound journals, Indian rice paper ledgers, oversized spirals for drawing public works and installations. “I’ve always loved a variety of sizes and am easily seduced by the feel and look of empty paper in a book,” he explained. “And the longing to fill it with words, pictures—something.”

We cruised through what’s now called the Depot District before eventually heading south on University to look for the former site of Cold Water Country, the club that served as a home base for the Maines Brothers Band and Joe Ely when Allen was making *Lubbock (on everything)*. But the city has changed so much since then that we drove by the spot, which now includes a Target and various fast-food options, without realizing it. “Did we already go past the Loop?” Allen asked. He was referring to the elevated Texas Highway 289, which was just being built when he first left Lubbock. After it was finished, ten years later, he’d gotten to know it well. “We would come back, and I’d get on the Loop and never wanted to get off,” he said. “Just drive the Loop, in circles.”

The Loop even gets a mention in the thank-you section of the original *Lubbock (on everything)* liner notes. Looping within, away from, and back to Lubbock has defined Allen’s career, and now here he was, five decades after his first departure, bequeathing almost the entirety of his artistic output to the Llano Estacado that had formed him. Allen likes to say (as do many Lubbock natives) that his hometown is so flat that on a clear day you can see the back of your own head. Even as he has always looked beyond Lubbock, the city has never left his sight.



A view of the High Plains outside Lubbock. Photograph by Wyatt McSpadden

**When Allen was a senior** at Lubbock’s Monterey High School, in 1961, he and his classmate David Box auditioned for the annual talent show. They earned a spot in the lineup by playing either a Bo Diddley song or the popular folk standard “Cotton Fields.” Allen can’t remember which, but he played piano and Box the guitar. (Box would go on to front a version of the Crickets after Holly’s death and died young in a plane crash himself.) But when the day of the actual performance came, the two budding rock and rollers switched their number without telling their teachers, taking the stage in togas and playing a racy song that Allen had written himself called “Roman Orgy.” The stunt earned them a three-day suspension. “It was my only scholastic achievement,” Allen told me.

But it was an achievement. Butch Hancock, who, along with Jimmie Dale Gilmore, was a Monterey sophomore at the time (their future Flatlanders bandmate Ely was two years younger), remembers being amazed. “I just heard somebody sing a song they wrote!” he marveled.

Allen’s playful, independent streak—the musical confidence, the inclination to provoke—was less rebellion than inheritance. His mother, Pauline, was a professional barrelhouse piano player who gave him exactly one keyboard lesson: how to play “Saint Louis Blues.” His father, Fletcher “Sled” Allen, had been a Major League Baseball player in 1910, then a Minor League manager (he’d led the Lubbock Hubbers to a championship in 1923) before he turned to promoting concerts, boxing matches, and professional wrestling. Terry grew up helping sell drink setups—Lubbock was dry back then—at wrestling matches and dances around town. Friday night dances were usually blues or R&B, for black audiences, while Saturday night was country, for white audiences. One show Terry remembers his dad promoting at the county fairgrounds was the country artist Little Jimmy Dickens, with Elvis opening. He has never forgotten the screaming girls, a phenomenon he’d only seen before watching Frank Sinatra on TV.

At the same time, and at those same fairgrounds, there were also record burnings. Rock and roll was as divisive and transformative in Lubbock as it was everywhere. “It was almost like the Vietnam War, except nobody was coming home in a box,” Allen told me. “All the preachers saying, ‘It’ll turn you into some kind of teenage thug, it will turn you into a racial minority, it will rot your soul!’” He also remembers everyone being transfixed by news of Nebraska teenager Charlie Starkweather and his murderous cross-country spree. “The first rock and roll killer,” he said. “Was he coming through Lubbock, kill-crazy, headed for Mexico? It had a riveting effect on my tiny adolescent brain.”

Starting in middle school, Allen would drive with friends to the cotton fields in the middle of nowhere—which wasn’t far—to park their cars in a circle, turn on the headlights, and dance to the sounds of deejay Wolfman Jack on Mexican station XERF, a ritual that Allen would later chronicle in the *Lubbock (on everything)* song “The Wolfman of Del Rio.” “With rock and roll, it was the first time people had music that really addressed them,” he told me. “Everything before had been God, family and country, and school. But rock and roll was about you, as an individual. ‘Don’t step on my blue suede shoes!’ In Lubbock, and in a lot of rural areas, it was the first open door to the outside world. The first time self-expression had a value.”

Allen wasn’t chafing to get out of town, but as the end of high school approached, he realized he needed to. “The only thing I was comfortable with was making drawings and writing in notebooks and playing music, and I didn’t have a concept of that being of any value,” he said. He enrolled at Texas Tech, but the only class he liked was drawing. After asking the professor if a school existed where the entire course load was like drawing class, he was told about, and decided to apply to, the Chouinard Art Institute, in Los Angeles (now the California Institute of the Arts). In the application, Allen was asked to name the greatest artist of all time, to which he answered Norman Rockwell, because he didn’t know the names of any others.

He was accepted, and that was enough to put Lubbock in the rearview mirror. “It was that need to get out into the world, without any real reason other than curiosity,” he recalled. “To get the nerve to do it, you blamed it on your hometown, or on your family, or on your school. Whatever was at hand to propel you out of there.”

Fortunately for him, he would not have to go alone: his girlfriend, Jo Harvey, had already agreed to move to California on a coin flip (New York being the other option). The two had met in middle school but were not a couple until senior year. “We always say we met when we were eleven,” Jo Harvey told me. “But I’m six months older than Terry, so it occurs to me that Terry might have been ten!” (“Our line is ‘We didn’t sleep together until we were twelve,’” said Terry.) Their connection was instant, a mix of chaos and friction combined with deep affection and like-mindedness that would fuel their long-lasting personal and artistic partnership. Jo Harvey gave Terry one of his first records ever, by John Lee Hooker; he gave her one by Jimmy Reed. Sometimes they’d go to the twenty-story Great Plains Life building, look up, and pretend they were in New York City, then go for coffee next door at the Lubbock Hotel, like fancy adults. She still remembers a date when he came to pick her up and, before she could open the car door to get in, yelled, apropos of nothing, “Run! Run for your life!” She got the joke. “We both just tore out running,” she said. “All night long, we hid from whoever was chasing us.” (“I think we’re still running from the sons of bitches,” said Terry.)

The two were married in Lubbock two months before he started at Chouinard full-time, and Jo Harvey joined him in L.A. Even as Terry went to art classes, music remained a fruitful vocation; he played the piano in cover bands and in solo performances. (True story: an unwitting drunk guy once offered \$50 to anyone who could play “Saint Louis Blues.”) For a time, he existed on the fringe of the growing rock and roll scene, with an appearance, in 1965, on the show *Shindig!* He also landed a record contract, but it was so financially unfavorable that he didn’t release any music. Both Terry and Jo Harvey also did experimental theater, and from 1965 to 1969, Jo Harvey hosted a groundbreaking weekly alternative radio show, *Rawhide and Roses*, in Pasadena. (Restoring the tapes of those broadcasts was one of the first things Texas Tech later did for the Allens.)

It was during this time that the ideas for *Juarez* began to swirl. Like most Texans, Allen grew up with the mythology of the border. “There was always that magnet,” he told me. “Every movie you saw, the romance of Mexico. You robbed a bank, you went to Mexico. You came back from the Civil War pissed off, you went to Mexico and joined the revolution. It was always, ‘Cross that line and everything will be different.’”

Bloody, romantic, and imaginative, *Juarez* came together over a period of about seven years. What started as a mix of songs and drawings morphed into a bigger, all-encompassing project, one that embraced all of Allen’s artistic interests. “My idea of making music was sitting in a back room trying to write words that made sense in some way, and that was a struggle,” said Allen. “But I was also thinking in the context of images. And how the two worked together. Could they become one thing?”

A song cycle about four star-crossed characters who make their way from California to Colorado and then Mexico, *Juarez* was originally released as a boxed edition, limited to fifty, with each copy also including six lithographs of the related art. The album’s subsequent “wide” release was just one thousand copies. Though eventually it would be considered a wide-ranging cultural influence—on the surreal hippie-punk music of the band Camper Van Beethoven, on Cormac McCarthy and his Border Trilogy—its slight distribution meant it received little attention at the time. (It was named “the best concept album ever recorded,” over *Red Headed Stranger* and the Who’s *Tommy*, by the website Popmatters almost thirty years later.)

*Juarez* became the urtext for Allen’s whole career: its characters and themes have turned up repeatedly in his work, and *Juarez* itself has experienced other lives, as a theater performance (starring Jo Harvey and the Panhandle Mystery Band), an unproduced film script, and a musical theater piece (co-written with David Byrne, of the Talking Heads, who also featured the Allens in his Texas film *True Stories*). What Allen came to realize is that everything—words, images, cultural and political contexts—was, for him, not only one thing but the same thing. He was aware of the cross-pollinating influences in his own life: the Beat poets and the tattoo and comics artists he’d discovered in the fifties, the politics and war and rock and roll of the sixties. He decided that labels were meaningless. “Are you a musician? Are you an artist? Are you a writer?” he said. “*What are you, anyway?* I’ve just never been comfortable with making these divisions.”

His career became ecumenical, his art finding expression in whatever medium suited him, with most of his major works falling into the category of “all of the above.” *Ring*, a multidisciplinary saga inspired in part by his father’s ties to professional wrestling, began in 1976 as a gallery exhibition, then became a theater performance and part of two museum exhibits. *Youth in Asia*, which Allen worked on from 1982 to 1990, was an ambitious series of exhibits and installations about the Vietnam War that included a 1968 classic-rock sound track, Disney characters, and a Buddha statue covered in bubblegum (freshly chewed and stuck on by workers at each showing). *Dugout*, a piece connected to his father’s baseball past, was a combination of installations, video, theater, and radio drama (as well as a 2005 University of Texas Press book).

“Art is about all of your senses,” Allen told me. “You don’t say, ‘Okay, today I am going to only look. Today I am going to only listen. Today I am going to only touch.’” It’s not, one might add, as if his multitasking is all that unusual: Patti Smith is also a painter; Byrne went from the Rhode Island School of Design to music to film and writing. There’s also a certain 2016 Nobel Prize winner for literature who paints and has written books and poems as well as songs. Whenever Allen has an idea, he doesn’t know what form it might take, and often it takes more than one. Whether it’s painting, sculpting, playing the piano, or writing a play, “What you’re trying to do is the same thing every time,” he told me. “You’re trying to deal with something you don’t know.”



Allen with a few of his journals and sketches in November 2016. Photograph by Leann Mueller

**The conventional wisdom** when it comes to Lubbock is that, while the city has always had its mystical, artistic, and wind-beaten independent side—it produced both Buddy Holly and the Flatlanders, after all—it is mostly a conservative place from which creative types have to escape. Hancock, Gilmore, and Ely all left. Mac Davis (“Texas in My Rear View Mirror”) and the Dixie Chicks’ Natalie Maines (“Lubbock or Leave It”) wrote songs about their own expatriation. Even Allen has been on the receiving end of this traditionalist bent: when up-and-coming country musician and Texas Tech alum Josh Abbott covered the *Lubbock (on everything)* diptych “FFA/Flatland Farmer” in 2012, fans found the lyrics to be heresy—three decades after the fact—for daring to mock Future Farmers of America. Abbott wound up writing an apology on Facebook.

But it is also an article of faith that Lubbock’s long horizons and dusty stretches are precisely what give rise to that creativity in the first place. “There’s a desperation to be visual when you grow up in a place that has nothing visual,” Allen is quoted saying in the liner notes for the reissued *Juarez*. Happy to continue satisfying those expressive cravings in L.A., he and Jo Harvey remained in California. They did, in 1970, make an attempt at living in Lubbock again, but the move was an exercise in frustration: when Terry wrote a jingle for the utility company Lubbock Power and Light, residents felt it was blasphemous (“Turn on brothers and sisters, and let your good light shine”), while Jo Harvey missed out on a local TV job because the station’s sponsors did not approve of a woman doing something as important as the weather forecast. Within months the couple had returned to California, where Terry was a guest artist at Cal-Berkeley for a semester before landing a job teaching at Fresno State.

They would eventually move to Santa Fe, in the late eighties. But along the way, in 1978, Lubbock beckoned again—this time with a glimmer of promise. During the Allens’ years away, the Lubbock music scene had coalesced. Stubb’s Bar-B-Q had opened as both a food joint and music venue, showcasing the likes of Stevie Ray Vaughan and Muddy Waters before audiences that were, in a move ahead of its time, integrated. The Flatlanders had come and gone; Hancock released his first record in early 1978, and Ely signed to MCA around the same time. Saxophonist Don Caldwell had established a recording studio, where Lloyd Maines, a steel-guitarist who played with Ely, launched a second career as a producer. Meanwhile, Allen—who’d had a few of his unreleased songs performed by Bobby Bare and Lowell George—had gone to work writing and sequencing a second album, this one devoted to his hometown. When Lubbock artist Paul Milosevich got wind of the new songs, he suggested that Allen come back to record them.



Allen and his wife, Jo Harvey, recording at Lubbock's Caldwell Studios in 1978.

Allen showed up at Caldwell Studios and met with Maines, as well as the rest of what would become known as the Panhandle Mystery Band, a sprawling assemblage of musicians that included Maines's brother, Kenny, who would back Allen on bass; Caldwell, on saxophone; Richard Bowden, on fiddle; Ely, on harmonica; and guitarist Jesse Taylor and accordionist Ponty Bone, both famed members of Ely's group. (Allen still uses the name Panhandle Mystery Band regardless of who's backing him.) "I didn't have that much confidence, because I didn't play with anybody," Allen recalled. "I didn't have a sense of being in a band." But the group went into the studio and managed to make a perfect, in-sync record almost immediately. It was a revelation: they already knew how to play together, it turned out, because they'd shared the same oxygen, seen the same cotton, and heard the same crickets (and Crickets).

A fan of the pounding rhythms of Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley growing up, Allen has famously played the piano very hard. "I did. I pounded the shit out of it," he said. "At one time, I had a collection of pedals I'd broken off of various pianos on a little shelf in my studio." When he'd recorded *Juarez*, the engineer had told him to sit still, lest the mikes pick up on the clatter. "They said, 'Don't stomp your foot, don't move your head,'" he recalled. "Don't, don't, don't." Maines and Caldwell, however, weren't about to infringe on Allen's style, so instead they filled the piano, and the space around Allen, with clumps of foam rubber. (Allen dubbed the pile "the only mountain in Lubbock.")

The resulting episodic song cycle, released the following year as *Lubbock (on everything)*, brings to mind a Texas version of Robert Altman's *Nashville*, packed with outsized and affectionately mocked characters—from the album's leadoff track, the satirical shit-kicker anthem "Amarillo Highway (for Dave Hickey)," to "The Great Joe Bob," the story of a gone-bad high school football hero. Of great personal relevance to Allen is "Truckload of Art," the supposedly true story of a group of New York artists who decide to flaunt their superiority by hauling their masterworks to the West Coast in a Peterbilt. The song pokes fun at the New York art world's arrogance from a California perspective, but it's a Texas perspective too, and also a self-mocking one. "Son, you're better off dead," sang Allen, "than haulin' a truckload full of hot avant-garde."

The record was no more widely distributed than *Juarez*, but it became legendary in certain circles. Brendan Greaves, the founder of Paradise of Bachelors—the label responsible for 2016's reissues—writes in his liner notes that, similar to the Velvet Underground's music in New York, seemingly everyone who bought Allen's album "started a band or started writing songs in a different way." Allen too was changed: by the time he

finished committing his songs to tape, he'd realized that there was a lot more to them than his jaundiced eye and sense of distance. "I never really felt that I'd made any kind of peace with Lubbock until I recorded that record," he said. "It dawned on me that there was something going on inside of me that was very counter to what I thought I felt. I started really listening to those songs and realized that I had a whole other sense of feelings and caring about the people."

In any case, the record presaged Allen's psychic, if not entirely physical, return to the fields and venues that first influenced him. Today's Lubbock is a growing college town that's still cotton, football, and conservative West Texas (the *Avalanche-Journal* was the only large newspaper in the state to endorse Donald Trump for president) but also more openly embracing of its artists: The Buddy Holly Center, a museum devoted to both Holly and multidisciplinary arts, opened in the Depot District in 1999, followed by the installation of a giant replica of Holly's glasses in 2002. In 2015, after years of estrangement with Natalie Maines over her 2003 comments about George W. Bush, the city partially made nice by inducting her into the West Texas Hall of Fame, the same year it inducted Jo Harvey (an important move for the Allens, given how close they've been to the Maines family since Natalie was a girl). And now, with the Allen Collection, Terry and Jo Harvey are getting their own little slice of Lubbock. Their creative trove had been headed for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art until Terry sent off a preliminary box of material—a combination of music and artworks, with tapes and catalogs from the sixties—and the museum sent it back. "They said, 'We don't want anything with music. We only want your art,'" Allen told me. "It was like, 'We'll take this part of what you do, but this other part of what you do, we disdain.' It pissed me off, so I told them, 'Forget it.'"

He and Jo Harvey plan to move their work to Lubbock over the next year, though the collection will not be fully accessible for another year or two after that. Their ideas for the project are loose; there's been talk of using the historic Dairy Barn facility on campus part-time for exhibitions or workshops, and Jo Harvey likes the idea of movable trailers. The notion is to create a place for students to make art and exchange ideas, where disciplines such as science and architecture and agriculture can overlap. "Creative work is creative work no matter where you're doing it," said Andy Wilkinson, a singer-songwriter who is currently an artist in residence at Texas Tech. It was Wilkinson who first broached the idea of bringing the collection to the university, and his enthusiasm is shared by others. "The opportunities of Lubbock spring from its hard bark and from the need to carve one's own path," noted Chris Taylor, an associate professor who directs the university's Land Arts of the American West program. "The Allen Collection's move home makes good on the value of this place as a cultural generator."

Whether that results in a literal "Center for Unlearning" remains to be seen. "It won't be written in script," said Allen—though he added, half-jokingly, that he has considered making a neon art piece with the words, to end up on campus somewhere. He defines "unlearning" as getting past blocks, shedding reflexive habits, finding new ways of creating. He thinks of Stubb's Bar-B-Q, which opened in 1968, as one of the city's first such centers. When Allen got back to town to record his second album, Stubb himself showed up at the recording studio at 2 a.m. with barbecue. "He was the epitome of the arts, in a sense. Here was a guy who had a space and fed people, and the space generated music, and music generated the space, and people of all kinds got together. And when he died, a whole other institution came out of it."

To have his and Jo Harvey's work embraced as valuable is nothing short of astounding to him. "I'm sure it would be amazing anywhere, but especially in Lubbock," he said. "That we left to go out into the world, then do what we do, and just suddenly, to be welcomed back—it really is amazing." Not that acceptance by the institutions of his youth means the rock and roll author of "Roman Orgy" isn't still alive and well. In one of our conversations, I told Allen about the campus tour guide's take on *Read Reader*, and he was pleased. "Any interpretation people have is fair. It's always great when somebody sees something in your work you never intended or thought of."



*Read Reader*, Allen's 2003 sculpture, on the Texas Tech campus. Photograph courtesy Texas Tech University System Public Art Program.

But then he pointed out another detail, one that hadn't been mentioned on the tour. The statue's rear end, located beneath the spine made out of book spines, was fashioned from a single open book, splayed out rather deliberately toward the rest of campus. "It's kind of facing the administration building," said Allen. "Every chance I get, I'll give an 'open book' to the administration!"

**Last May, after** several bouts in the hospital, Allen's friend Guy Clark died at the age of 74. The singer-songwriter, who grew up in Rockport and lived mostly in Nashville, was originally from Monahans, or "sub-Lubbock," as Allen likes to say, and the two first met in the eighties, when they both played the Kerrville Folk Festival. They maintained a close friendship, and before his death, Clark made a request: he asked that his ashes become part of an Allen sculpture. "Sobering and hilarious at the same time," said Allen. He pushed back. "What I should do is make a goat," I told him, "and take your ashes and shove it up its ass." He said, "Perfect!"

After a wake in Nashville, Clark's ashes made an eighteen-hour bus ride to Santa Fe, escorted by Steve Earle, Rodney Crowell, and other friends, as well as Clark's son, Travis, for a private memorial at the Allens' home. Terry has since been pondering the commission. He does not care to repeat the experience of sculpting a friend's likeness, as he did with Stubb; it was unnerving to share work space with the figure of a dead friend. He is considering something else. Clark was haunted by two crows' nests, made out of barbed and bailing wire, that were found inside a windmill at Lubbock's American Wind Power Center. The nests, made in the absence of twigs, were the inspiration for what might have been the last song Clark ever wrote. "It has a line about a crow," said Allen. "So black you could only see it at night."

The song is one that Clark, working on and off with Crowell, struggled to finish, and it is not, in Allen's opinion, his best. "But all of his conversations were about trying to make this song work," he said. "There was a sense of desperation about finishing it." He paused. "I'm not so sure the whole thing was even about the song. It was maybe not meant to get finished. I'm not sure it wasn't some kind of last exploration on his part—what was happening to him and what was going on. But he loved that those crows' nests got built so beautifully out of almost nothing, just like a song."

This leaving and returning—to a place, to an idea, to a thing—is a familiar instinct. After his visit to Lubbock, Allen spent the fall in Austin, preparing for the opening of his latest installation, a full-size bronze replica of a car titled *Road Angel*. The piece, cast in the Deep in the Heart Art Foundry, in Bastrop, was unveiled in December on the outdoor grounds of Austin’s sculpture park at Laguna Gloria. The work is an almost-exact copy of Allen’s first vehicle, a 1953 Chevy, except for a missing front passenger-side tire. That wheel well instead hides a speaker that blasts, as Allen put it, “Things you’d want to hear coming out of a car.”



*Road Angel*, his newest installation, on the grounds of Laguna Gloria, in Austin.

The installation is in keeping with other Allen sculptures that feature sound tracks, including 1986’s *Trees*, his first public outdoor installation—which emits songs, stories, and poems—at the University of California–San Diego, and 1999’s *Countree Music*, his piece at the George Bush Intercontinental Airport, in which a roughly thirty-foot bronze oak looms over a distorted global map, with Houston as the center of the world (as the people hustling through Terminal A move over the map, they trigger the playback of 21 songs inspired by air travel). In *Road Angel*’s case, the sound track was provided by writers, artists, musicians, and storytellers, including Crowell, Earle, and Wilkinson. Artist Ed Ruscha made a recording of himself reading a piece called “Vehicular Ventricle” by the poet and actress Amber Tamblyn. Singer Shawn Colvin covered Bruce Springsteen’s “Racing in the Street.” And Allen’s son Bale wrote a song (“Winters-Wingate Highway”) that includes the line “Neil Young on the radio playing guitar sounds just like the way I drive my car.”

The installation is a meditation of sorts on the imprint cars have left on both Allen and his audience. “The great Western romance of moving through space in an automobile is coming to an end,” he wrote in the accompanying notes. He can remember when that romance began: how the checkers-playing old-timers in Lubbock—men just older than his father who had been alive for the Battle of Palo Duro—complained about “how their kids didn’t care about the land and only cared about their cars.” He and Jo Harvey may no longer drive out to the cotton fields to dance to the sounds of the Wolfman, but they do put in thousands of miles between Santa Fe and Lubbock, as well as anywhere else in Texas they’re performing music or showing art. His truck has long played an important part in his recording process, the “car stereo test” (a familiar ritual at most studios) requiring a lot of open Texas road. “Every time Terry finished an album and he’d get the tapes, we’d get on the highway and go for a long ride and listen to it,” recalled Jo Harvey.

*Road Angel* is also a work in progress in and of itself. One of the things Allen likes about doing large pieces is that they are both fluid and one of a kind, in a way that a recorded song or finished painting can’t be. “The thing

about an installation is, you have to be there,” he said. “It’s like talking about a song. You really need to hear it. You have to walk through and be inside the thing.” He and the museum plan to add new audio submissions on a semi-regular basis. In the meantime, there’s another potential layer still to come: because of the installation’s location in a wooded, remote portion of Laguna Gloria, his son Bukka—who also contributed a song (“Land of Dreams”) to the sound track—has predicted it will immediately become one of Austin’s great make-out spots.

It’s the kind of interactivity that both delights and motivates Allen, that keeps him moving continually forward even as he returns to the past, always on the Loop. “That’s been an endless pattern for me,” he said when we’d talked about the archives bringing him and Jo Harvey back to Lubbock. “Art always takes you in some kind of circle back to yourself, each one different.” T

Copyright © 2017. All rights reserved.