

Terry Allen casts Lubbock and Juarez in full color at the Paramount

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By John T. Davis - Special to the American-Statesman



Terry Allen, right, with his son Bukka at Waterloo Records in 2013. Allen performed Saturday night at the Paramount Theatre. Alberto Martinez/AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Lubbock ain't never gonna be cool.

Not going to happen. The conservative, inelegant, sand-scrubbed little city marooned in the flat and formidable vastness of the Great South Plains won't ever be overrun with hipster cachet a la Marfa. The art mob will not flock. The cognoscenti will not congregate.

That being said, the ongoing paradox of the place is how much art, specifically music, can arise from such humble and inauspicious origins. From Bob Wills and Buddy Holly back in the day to the Dixie Chicks' Natalie Maines and singer-songwriter-fiddler Amanda Shires today, the Texas Panhandle has been an unlikely wellspring of ferocious creativity.

As a songwriter, performer, artist, sculptor and author, Terry Allen has spent his lifetime exploring that chasm between art and origins. Saturday night at the Paramount Theatre, he revisited two of his seminal explorations

into the abiding strangeness of the borderland, the American West in general and West Texas in particular: his 1975 debut song suite “Juarez” and the 1979 double-LP tour de force “Lubbock (on everything).”

Allen has performed songs from both works for decades, but this show was a studied look back scheduled to coincide with the re-release of both albums in elaborately annotated editions on the Paradise of Bachelors label. The idea was to perform both albums nearly in full sequence over two sets, a design that helped put the songs in focus and in context to one another.

Performing with his Panhandle Mystery Band, an extended family of longtime amigos spearheaded by guitarist and producer Lloyd Maines and including his sons Bale and Bukka, Allen eschewed fanfare and launched straight into “The Juarez Device” (a.k.a. “Texican Badman”), the introductory salvo to “Juarez.” Imagine an hourlong borderland corrido scripted by Cormac McCarthy and you have some idea of the scope of Allen’s 42-year old masterpiece. Borrowing from the familiar trope of beautiful outlaws on the run across the West (“I leave a few people dead/ But I got open road ahead”), Allen takes a deep dive into the idea of borders and limits and dislocation and love, and what it means to be looking at each of them from one side versus the other.

Joined by guests Ryan Bingham and Charlie Sexton, the band gave wings to songs that, on the “Juarez” album, were performed mostly as solo pieces. From the percussive gospel groove of “Border Palace” to the sprightly Tex-Mex waltz of “Cantina Carlotta” and the furious bluegrass-styled breakdown of “There Oughta Be a Law Against Sunny Southern California,” which was juxtaposed against the lovely, lilting Mexican processional “La Despedida (The Parting),” Allen and company put a Technicolor glow on a noir Western vision.

The second half of the show, consisting of most of the tunes from “Lubbock (on everything),” was more specific in place and lighter in tone. At times the Paramount resembled less a hoity-toity theater than a West Texas honky-tonk, as folks cheered and sang along with the tale of a football golden boy turned bad (“The Great Joe Bob [A Regional Tragedy]”), a cafe waitress as lovely and enigmatic as a Panhandle Mona Lisa (“The Beautiful Waitress”), highballing trains bound for God-knows-where (“New Delhi Freight Train”), and the ceaseless allure of open roads and beckoning horizons (“Amarillo Highway”). The band, along with guest Joe Ely and backup vocalists Terri Hendrix and Savannah Welch, dug into the songs like it was all-you-can-eat night at Stubb’s Barbecue.

“Lubbock,” said Terry’s wife, playwright and actress Jo Harvey Allen, by way of introducing the second set, “is always in the rear view mirror right in front of our face.” In other words, no matter how resolutely uncool the Hub City (home of the Red Raiders, white bread and blue northers) remains, the unchanging vastness of space, land and sky harbors a deep reservoir full of art and wonder.

Or, as one of Allen’s character sings, “The closest I’ll ever get to heaven is makin’ speed up ol’ 87/ Of that hard-ass Amarillo Highway.”

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