

Robert Earl Keen

His Road Back Home

By Joanne Liu

Photos by Scott Vallance

EVER SINCE THE 1970S WHEN Robert Earl Keen marked his college days at Texas A&M with front-porch picking and fiddling along with musicians the likes of Lyle Lovett, he has been steadily shaping his singer-songwriter legacy.

Keen has 17 albums to his name, with songs like *Grimo Honeymoon*, *Merry Christmas From the Family* and *The Road Goes On Forever* livening up music history books with their indecorous characters and sharp-witted narration.

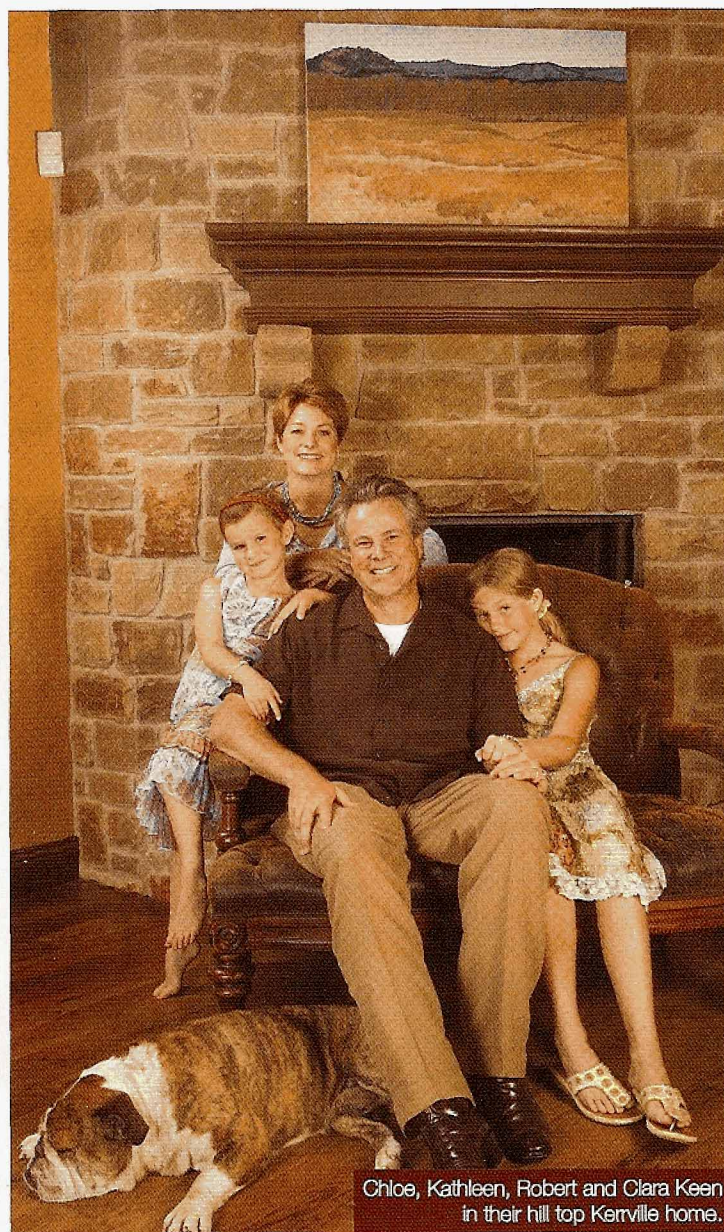
Over the past few decades, he's gathered a legion of loyal followers and continues to strike emotional chords wherever he plays. (The State of Texas honored him by proclaiming May 10, 2005, as "Robert Earl Keen Day.") But despite his lyrics, accolades and fans' hearty sing-along renditions, the road does *not* go on forever. That's because for Robert Earl Keen, the road ends in the Texas Hill Country where he and his family make their home.

Keen's music ties him to the road 120 days a year, so when he is back home, it's all the sweeter. Born in Houston in 1956 to a petroleum engineer and family law attorney, he now lives with his own family — wife Kathleen and daughters Clara, 11, and Chloe, 6 — among more than a half-dozen pets with names such as Wheedle and Bro.

Though he claims to be an animal-tolerant guy surrounded by animal lovers, Keen truly has a big heart. (For example, he discovered and rescued one animal — now a family pet — on a roadside just about ready for a good trampling by a herd of cows.) Perhaps he takes after his soft-hearted mother, one of the first female attorneys in Houston in the late 1950s, who "took every indigent case that ever walked in her office," Keen says.

AFTER A STINT IN NASHVILLE in the 1980s, Keen returned to Texas with his independent spirit intact. Over the years, he and Kathleen planted roots in Bandera, Medina and finally Kerrville. For a while, they had even experimented with city life in a San Antonio town house, only to conclude they were better suited to country living.

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Chloe, Kathleen, Robert and Clara Keen in their hill top Kerrville home.

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Just last year, they moved from their secluded Medina ranch of nine years to a Spanish villa-style house in Comanche Trace, an 18-hole golf course community. The reason for the move was simple, says Keen. “If you don’t see people, you find yourself getting odd.”

He still holds onto his ranch, though he uses it as a place to find solitude as well as to pursue songwriting and outdoor activities such as hunting. Earlier this year, the property was chosen as one of the locales for “Images of Conservation Fund Pro-Tour of Nature Photography,” a world-class competition among nature photographers.

In their new surroundings, the Keens have befriended many neighbors, including the district attorney who successfully prosecuted the 1998 dragging murder of James Byrd Jr. in Jasper and for whom Kathleen assists in the writing of his memoir.

In their spare time, they’ve taken advantage of the community’s many facilities, including the fitness center where Keen boxes and lifts weights, and the swimming pool where they celebrated Chloe’s sixth birthday.

Keen also has found much enjoyment in cooking, one of life’s simple pleasures. Both he and Kathleen regularly joke that if he ever wrote a cookbook, they’d name it *Robert Earl Keen’s Fry On High*. Though Clara and Chloe enjoy his spaghetti and meat sauce, Keen recently vowed to up the ante in his culinary repertoire. To that end, he has been preparing

new dishes. And while he didn’t break a sweat making Jell-O, other attempts (including chicken caldo and shrimp pad thai) have presented challenges.

His new kitchen status, however, doesn’t prevent the family from patronizing their favorite Kerrville restaurants, such as Bill’s Bar-B-Que (Texas style) and Francisco’s (Keen swears by the black bean and zucchini soups).

KATHLEEN TAKES CARE OF THE GIRLS when Keen is on the road. Married for 20 years, the couple first met in Gruene Hall’s front room. Keen says, “There was no one at the show except Kathleen and her friend Tracy. They sat there drinking beer and laughing, and never, never paid attention to me. So finally I quit and sat down and asked, ‘Can I sit here with you all?’”

They became friends that day and ran into each other off and on, and in 1984 met at a Nanci Griffith concert in Austin. Kathleen’s boyfriend at the time split early, leaving Kathleen and Keen together. They closed out the evening at the Texas Chili Parlor, where he asked her out for the first time.

Their marriage came two years later in 1986, and is still “beating all the odds in the music-entertainment business,” Keen gloats.

Kathleen describes her husband as a gentleman and a leader. “We strive for a very concrete ideal of home, marriage and family.” Because Keen is on the road a lot, she bears





much of the responsibility in that arena. "We both want one of us — that is me — to be available for the children all of the time." Anyone who meets Kathleen soon finds her spunk and inquisitiveness both endearing and genuine.

Keen values authenticity, too. Though his house faces a golf course, he doesn't tee off very often. Like most fans, he has his own ideas about the sport: "Here's the way I look at it. You should be a golf freak, and they should make 180-hole golf courses where you play three weeks in a backpack and make an entire lifestyle event out of it."

More opinions on the topic: "Golf should be about nine holes. Set her down after two-and-a-half hours, then go have a beer and a burger, and go on with your day. But to knock out five hours, not only do I start getting tired but I start thinking, 'I have to do something with my life.'"

What would Keen rather do? "Bow hunt" is his ready answer. "With bow hunting, you have to be completely still, really camouflaged, really stuck in brush and really quiet." Perhaps this is a similar approach he takes with his music.

EVEN IF MUSIC TAKES KEEN AWAY from the Hill Country, the Hill Country is where his music finds its start.

His "scriptorium," built in 1998, sits atop a scraggy ridge overlooking his ranch. A limestone cabin hardly larger than 400 square feet, the Old World hideaway with its jailhouse

windows, wood plank floors and ironwork (e.g., bed frame, chandelier and sconces) is a musical wellspring of ideas for Keen. When working on an album, he holes up here for weeks at a time with his instruments.

Inside, visitors will find bookcases of Western titles (think Zane Grey) he's collected over the years while on the road; hanging above the fireplace, the skull of an elk (a hunting trophy); and a selection of faded wooden chairs. All are enough to keep him company. If you hand Keen a few loaves of white bread, bologna, mustard and some beer, he's able to sit for a

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Keen's little princesses, Chloe, left, and Clara play a board game in their family room.

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long stretch inside these walls. And that's a good thing, since sitting is what he does when he's waiting for music to come to him.

What you soon realize, if you spend some quality time with Keen, is that he simply can't separate his arrant love for music from his love for Texas and this building, offering all the simple comforts of life.

Keen always has done his own thing, which is one of the reasons why he appreciates the Texas music scene where musicians freely "play what feels fun to play, and follow [their] instincts and own hearts about music."

Although Keen is the staunchest supporter of freedom of music, he's diligent about his own playing. Nowadays, he works as hard as ever.

"I try to play music as much as possible," he explains. "I play something probably an hour a day, and I generally play the mandolin. I'm on the bus all day, and it's the easiest bus instrument 'cause it's so small and it's kind of fun."

As for his children's musical proclivities: "They have some interesting music rhythm," he says. "I really don't push them ... Like anything in life, it's about feeling like you found it and you own it."

Keen does reveal that Clara has taken piano lessons and Chloe has expressed an interest in music — although not for the stringed instruments he's accustomed to picking up. Instead, she wants to take violin lessons, which is fine by him. Entertaining Chloe with endearing lyrics such as "You can hug me if you want to," or listening to Clara's poetry recitations and profuse descriptions of their pets (especially her horse), is satisfaction enough for this proud papa.

KEEN IS A READING MAN. An English major in college, he's nurtured his passion for literature through the years, studying John Steinbeck, Ernest Hemingway and Saul Bellow, among others.

"I heard something from John Updike the other day. He said that there's more truth in fiction than there is in nonfiction. I've always felt like that, and I was so glad when I heard that. When people mask something in a work of fiction, that's their chance to *really* give you the truth." Keen's belief in finding truth in fiction carries over to the stories he spins in his songs.

One thing many agree on is that Keen's lyrics have a kind of poetry to them — including *Rolling Stone* writer Meredith Ochs, who calls Keen an insightful poet.

What does Keen think about that? Surprisingly, he disagrees: "I'm not a poet, because real poets are magical. They string things together that normally wouldn't make sense, but for whatever reason you go, 'Golly, I know (we took out why) that works, but I don't know why that works.'"

The best way for Keen to explain poetry is with a story about a Hill Country restaurant.

"There's this one restaurant that everybody knows, and one time we were eating these enchiladas that they make. They were less than great," he recalls. "I asked my father-in-law, 'What do you think of these enchiladas?' And he said, 'They taste like they've been shot out of a cannon.'" Keen laughs as he explains, "I didn't know exactly what that meant, but that's poetry, right? I knew what the whole idea was. That's what a poet does. A poet puts together something you can't even repeat exactly why [it makes sense]."



Robert shows writer Joanne Liu pieces in his string collection.

“I would want somebody to say that I was a really great songwriter ... My true gift is writing.”

Instead of poetry, Keen focuses on his abilities as a songsmith. “I would want somebody to say that I was a really great songwriter, that I was able to say something that they couldn’t say. My true gift is writing.”

Keen has been called many things besides a poet and musician, including a founding father of Texas country music, a square peg in a world of round holes, and the drinking-thinking man’s Texas songwriter. His voice has been described as “decidedly non-operatic, as though a saddle burr is caught in his throat,” and he’s even described himself as “just a step above Roseanne Barr.”

Whatever words are summoned to describe his music, Keen remains a person bent on writing songs his own way. He always has, and always will. What he does in his Hill Country home is no different.

SIT DOWN WITH KEEN in his well-kept house in Kerrville and you’ll soon discover the experience isn’t a far cry from kicking back and swapping stories with the boy back in College Station.

Sure, the Louis Shanks furniture is degrees nicer than any chair you’d find on a university student’s porch. The double-length windows offer magnificent views of Hill Country landscape, and the walls feature captivating paintings by James “Dusty” Pendleton (whose work also graces the covers of several Keen CDs).

Keen still colors his everyday words with the same sense of humor pervasive in his music. Ask him about the time he roasted a turkey in a barbeque pit on the same holiday his mother-in-law roasted one in the oven. As you listen to this storyteller and laugh along, you’ll find someone fully satisfied with the life he’s shaped. What’s more, he’s as genuine in life as he is in his songs. He tells it like it is and then some.

And one thing’s for sure: He never hides his love for his Texas Hill Country life. Everything he needs, everything he loves, Keen finds it at home. ☞

Joanne Liu is a freelance writer living in Austin.

HOPING TO CATCH A GLIMPSE OF ROBERT EARL KEEN THIS SEASON?

Country Western’s star renegade is scheduled to appear in a town near you — New Braunfels, Brenham, Galveston, Fort Worth and Henderson, to name a few. Visit his Web site, www.RobertEarlKeen.com, for details and MP3 samples from his 2005 release, *What I Really Mean*.

Keen certainly keeps busy. In July, he released his fourth live album, *Live at the Ryman*, a recording from his 2004 concert in the former home of Nashville’s Grand Ole Opry.

For a recording closer to home, check out *Live from Austin, TX*, a 2004 release of his performance on “Austin City Limits” in 2001.

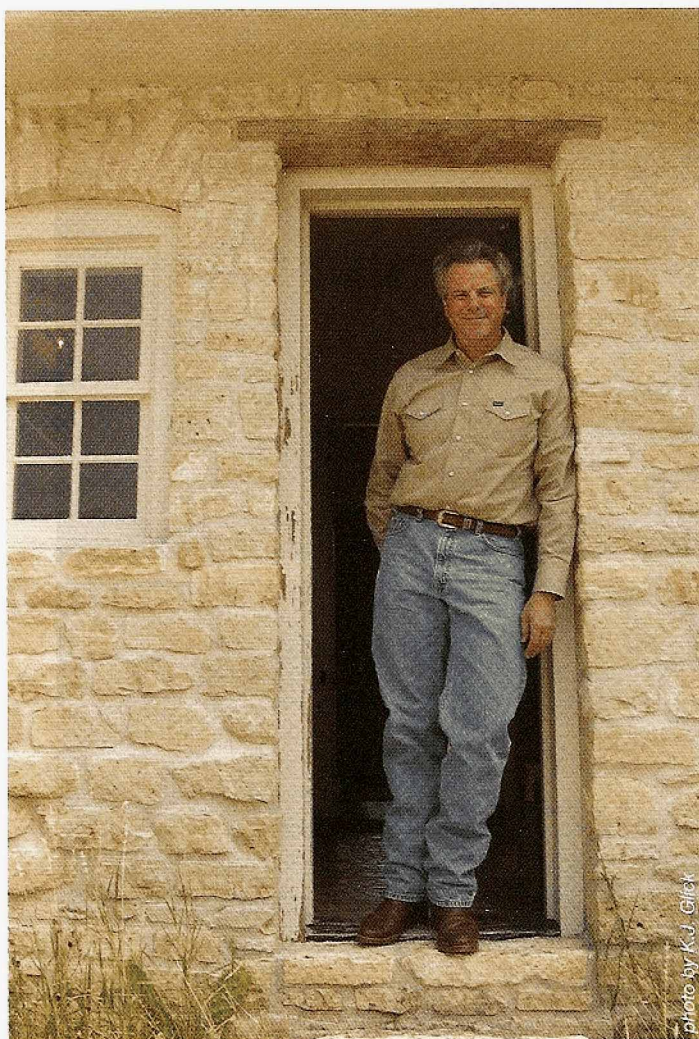
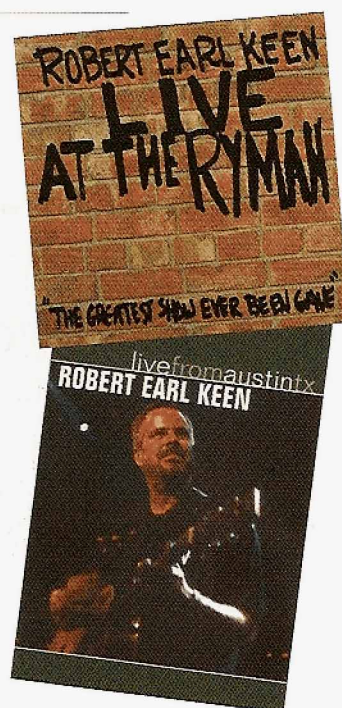


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