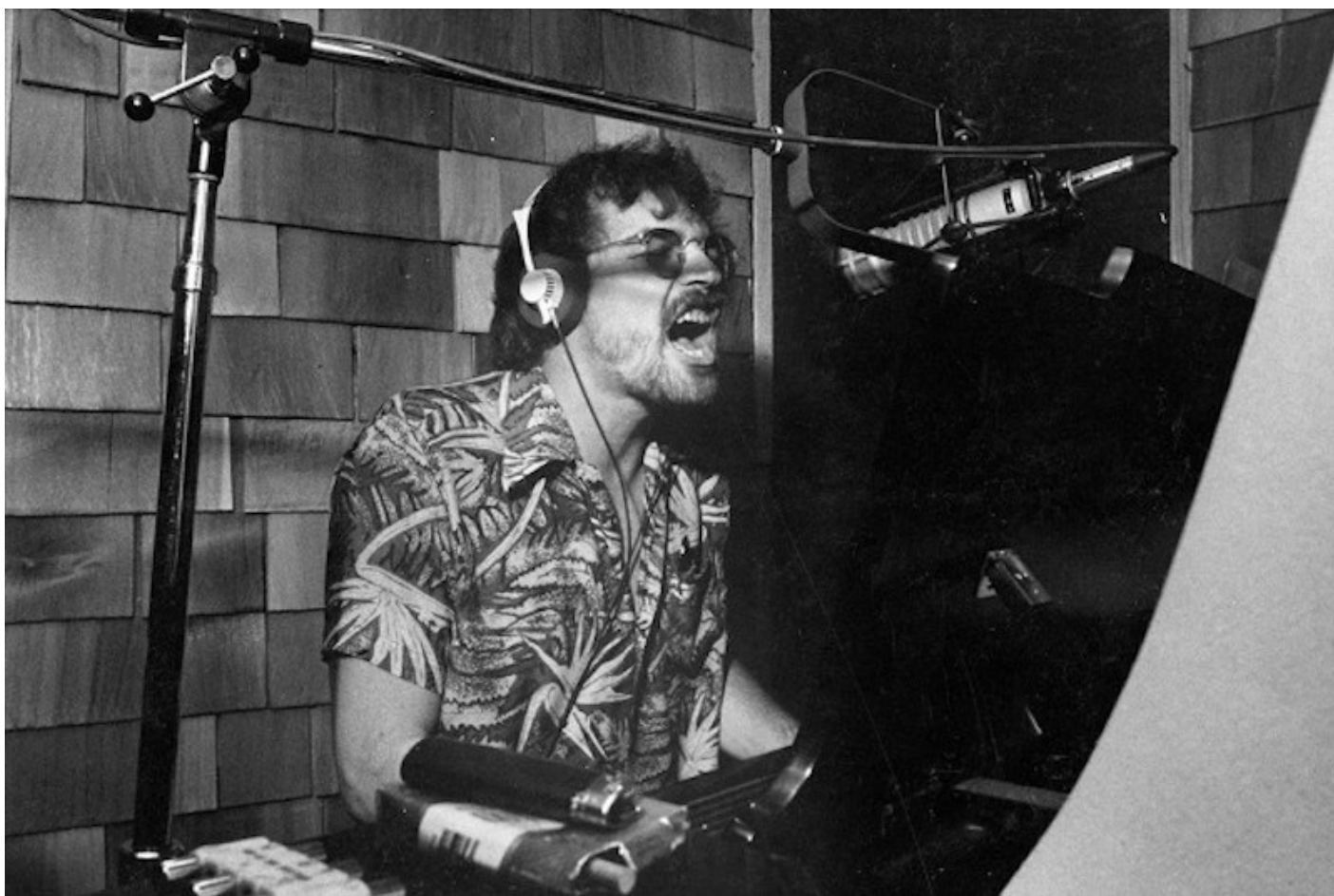


Aquarium Drunkard

Terry Allen :: The AD Interview



Terry Allen is a maker of things. A sculptor, illustrator, playwright, collagist, and, perhaps most famously, a singer and songwriter who, over the last five decades, has amassed

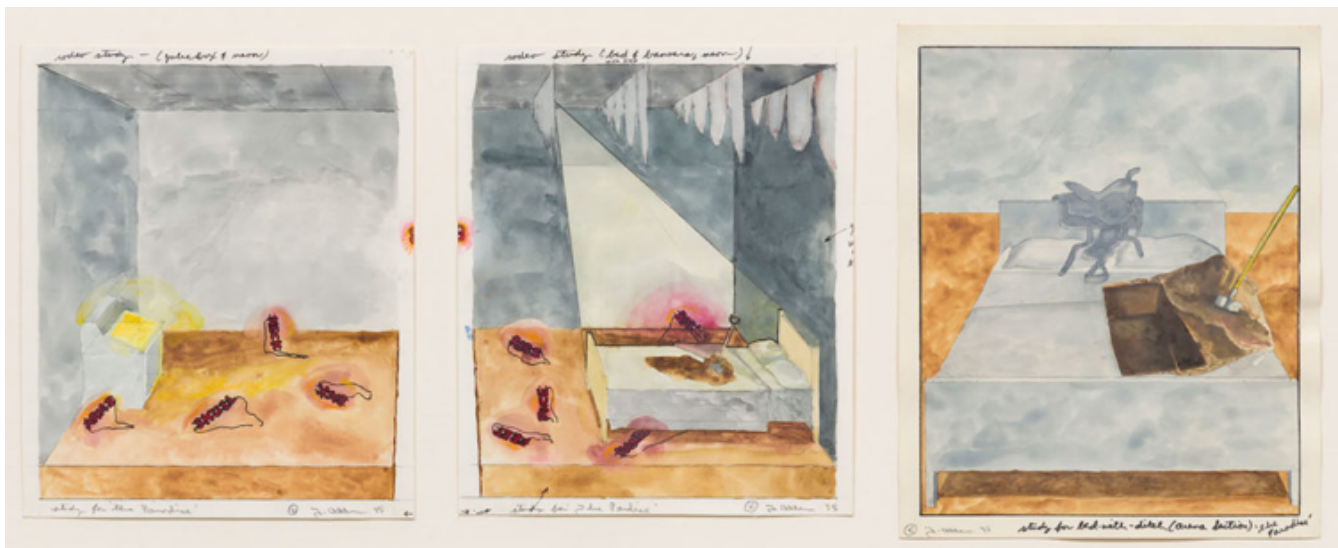
an extensive catalog of avant-country gold. His 1975 album *Juarez*, a striking and brilliant concept album that plays as a kind of sunburned, southwestern *Badlands*, and 1979's sprawling *Lubbock (On Everything)*, a rollicking and wry send-up of Allen's West Texas hometown, are rightly held up as unimpeachable masterpieces of proto-american music. Each have recently received extensive reissues by the North Carolina label Paradise of Bachelors, who will also issue Allen's forthcoming new album.



We recently sat down with Allen at the Louver Gallery in Venice, CA, who on June 26th opened [*Terry Allen: The Exact Moment it Happens in the West*](#), a comprehensive two-story exhibit of Allen's work across multiple mediums dating from the 1960s to the present. The show will run through September 28th. In an incredibly rare occurrence, Allen also in late July performed two sold out nights at Zebulon on the east side of Los Angeles with an all-star band including Allen's son Bukka, acclaimed guitar-slinger, Bob Dylan bandleader, and Townes-Van-Zandt-channeler Charlie Sexton, Texan fiddler Richard Bowden, and the singer-songwriter Shannon McNally.

Our conversation has been slightly edited for length and clarity.

Aquarium Drunkard: One thing that has always interested me about your body of work, particularly your recorded music body of work, is your repertoire over time, where songs such as “Cortez Sail,” or “Four Corners,” or “Red Bird,” have appeared throughout your career in various incarnations, recorded at various times. I’m curious what it is that compels you to revisit a certain composition, in some cases numerous times?



Terry Allen: I think where that happened the most is with *Juarez*. *Juarez*, when I cut that, it was cut on such a non-

Juarez. *Juarez*, when I cut that, it was cut on such a non-budget, and I heard a lot of instrumentation at the time that I couldn't afford, and so I've always wanted to just experiment a little bit with what they might sound like with other instruments. So really on every record, other than *Lubbock (On Everything)*, pretty much every record I've put out, there's at least one *Juarez* song that's really with a band. That's really where that came from more than anything. And "Red Bird" was the first song I felt like was a *real* song that I ever wrote. I did it on "Shindig" and I had a time restriction on that show...I think they gave me...it seemed like a minute, but it was more like a minute and a half or 2 minutes, but they wanted me to do two songs – there were two songs they liked that I did, so I sang "Red Bird" incredibly fast, with this other song called "Freedom School." And so when we cut *Smokin The Dummy*, we did a little thing where we can kind of added a little instrumental section of "Dixie" to it, and that altered the song a little. That's about the only songs I can think of, other than using different songs in theater pieces, or elements of them.

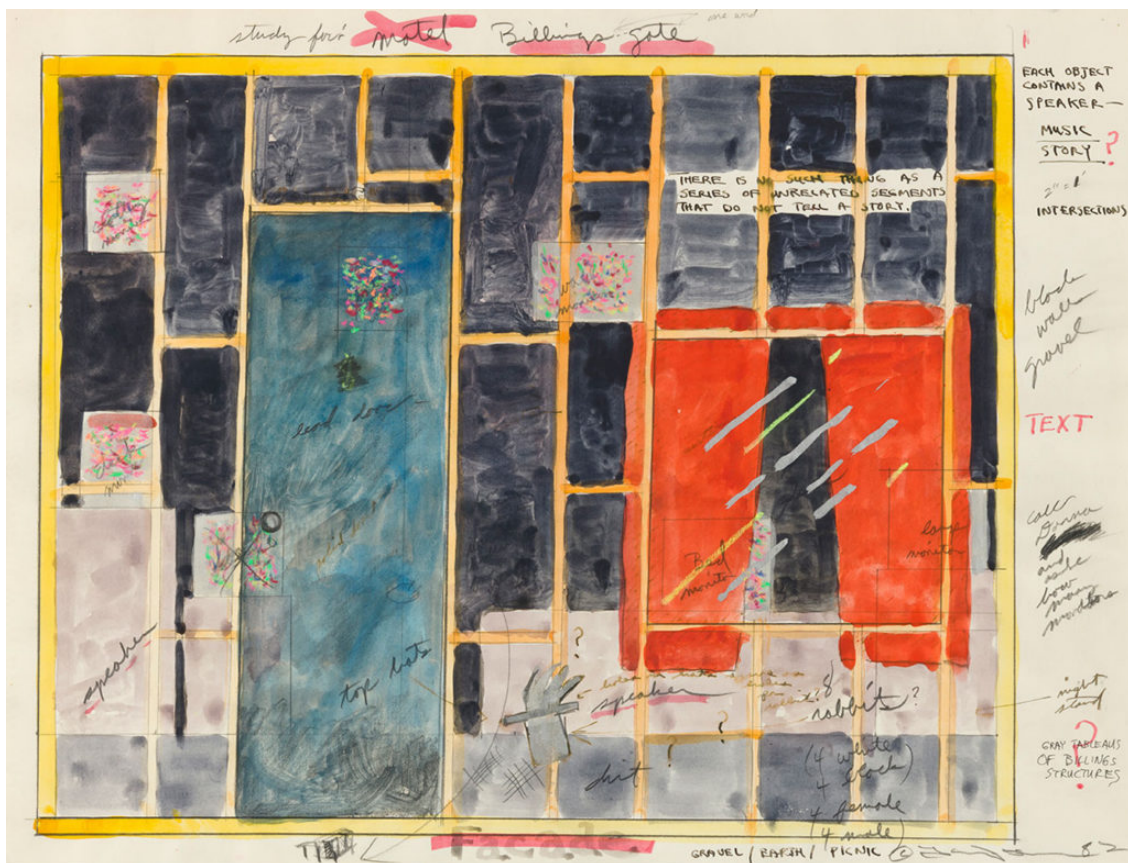
AD: That leads me to my next question. How do they change? If you take a song like "Four Corners," that's originally in the context of a narrative like *Juarez*, and then you put it as the first song on *Bottom of the World* in 2013, does it change the song for you as the artist to take it out of

that narrative? Does it change the song singing it as Terry Allen in 2013 versus Terry Allen in 1975? To me it almost sounds like on *Juarez*, it's an action – an active song, and on *Bottom of the World*, even your vocal tone, by definition, has more of a meditative or reflective tone on the same composition.

Terry Allen: I think that any time you cut a record, you're cutting in the time of your life that you're making it, and it's never the same. One thing about this exhibition, I feel like when I walk through it that I'm walking through just one lifetime after another, after another. Jo Harvey (*Allen's wife and longtime collaborator*) and I were talking about that today, that we've lived so many lives, very different kinds of lives – relative to our work, relative to what our curiosity is, and where our geography is at the time. So, it's like someone asking you..."Why don't you go do another *Lubbock (On Everything)*, or why don't you do another *Juarez*?" First of all, it would be the last thing I'd want to do, but I don't think you *can* do that. You work on things relative to the time of your life that you're making them, and that's *that* period of time, so, it's bound to be different.

I had never re-cut "Four Corners" before, but I was doing some prints. There's a [box of prints](#) I did with Landfall

Press, which is like a song book, where for each song, there's sheet music that's drawn, and that's similar to what *Juarez* was initially. So I was thinking of those images when I recorded that, as well as how it connected with the rest of the songs in that piece. I think there's always, whether you know it or not, or think about it, there's always a through-line that somehow happens in a work that you're making, and so it becomes *one* thing. I feel very different about that "Four Corners." And also, as you say, it's like pulling it out of a story where it's a chapter, and then it becomes just its own. It becomes something else that has, in a way, nothing to do with that initial record.



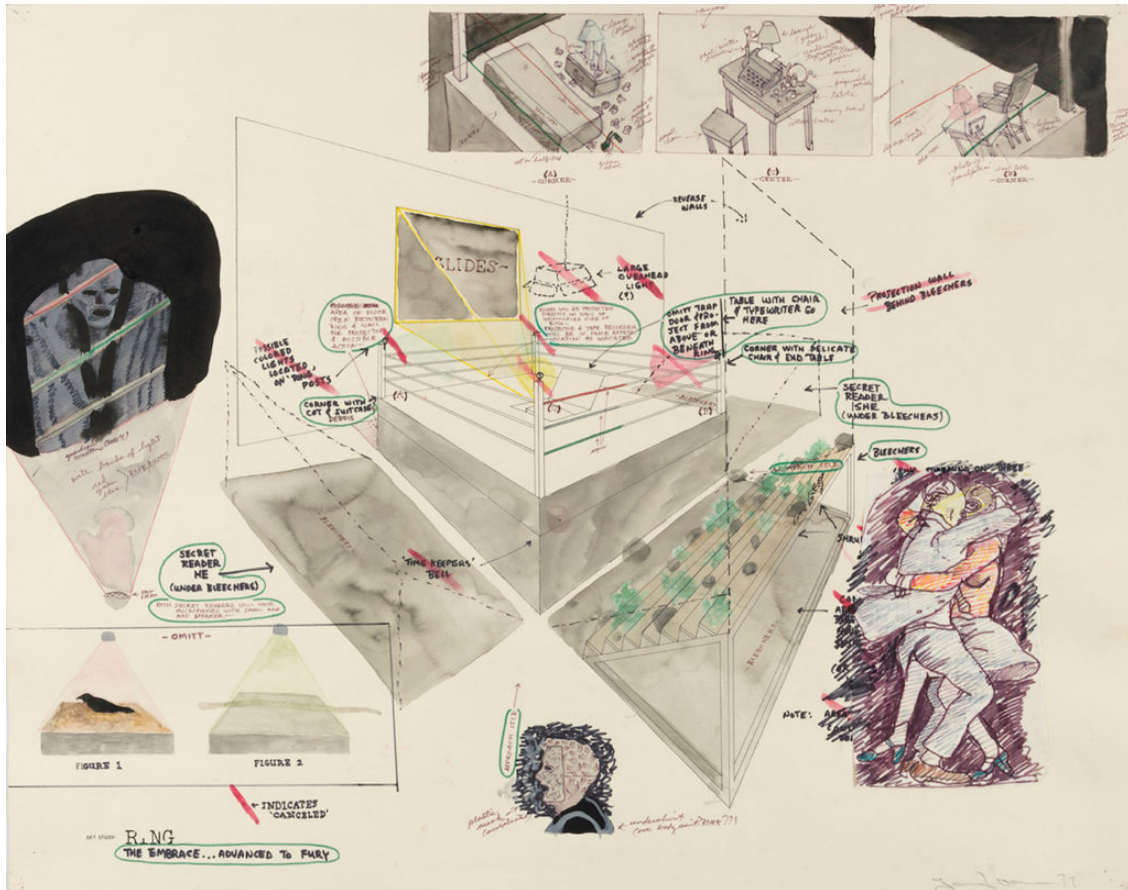
AD: One thing that this show that's on view now at the

Louwer does is connect these moments in time, these lifetimes if you will. You've operated in various mediums, whether it's radio plays, sculpture, drawings, obviously recordings, and with something like *Juarez*, that sort of skitters in all of these different directions, I'm curious if, when you have a moment of inspiration, are you thinking holistically about every form that an image can take, or is it "I know that this is just a song" or "this is just a sculpture"?

Terry Allen: No, I think it's one thing that kind of... instigates another. I might go in and think I'm just writing a song or making a drawing, or an object, and then the next thing I know, it's informing something else, and suddenly I get the urge to make a song that goes with that drawing. It's like this weird disease that hits you, and all of the sudden you find yourself in this body of work.

One thing that I've always been interested in is the other side of things. The side that you *don't* see. When you make a song – the images that it conjures. How do you address that in a picture, or how would you address that in a theater piece? It just opens up each of those. Like, *Juarez* has been such an on-going kind of idea – I've always called it a haunting in a way – because it keeps coming back in some form or another, and it's actually informed everything else I've ever done. The way that I have to think my way, or feel

my way, into the work is kind of the way I've approached everything that I've done since I first did that piece. It's not a defined process. I think if it becomes defined, I really immediately stop giving a shit about it.



AD: Speaking of process, another thing that I've always found fascinating is that I feel like you have an incredible sense of the music of language and of certain words – if it's “caliche,” or “Pachuco,” or “Colorado.” I've always been curious if you, in these narrative structures that you build, if you bend the narrative to celebrate that moment, that word? Take “caliche” – does “Roses, Red Roses” come from wanting to build a world around that word, or is it the

reverse

Terry Allen: That's a hard one to answer, because I don't know if there is an answer. "Caliche," it's also in "Flatland Boogie," and most of the people that I know say they've never heard that word in a song before, but there's not anything unusual about "caliche glows in the moonlight." It does. But somebody who lives in a place that doesn't have caliche, I assume they have no idea what you're talking about. And then "Red Roses," I wrote it in 1968. Always when we were in LA, we were going back and forth a lot to Texas, where caliche, and caliche *pits*, were very common, so I don't find that odd, but I do like that word. I think it's like a *martian* kind of word. There are certain words that I think, *present* themselves, when you're just working on a song, and that word itself can encapsulate a whole series of ideas, or thoughts, or ways to maybe proceed or not proceed with something else that you're working on.

But you know...kind of anything I would say about it would really be bullshit because it's very mysterious. That's one of the reasons, I think, that you make things, is to address these kinds of mysteries, and you get the other side of it, and then I'm not sure that you know any more about it than you did, but you've left something that's *made* there.

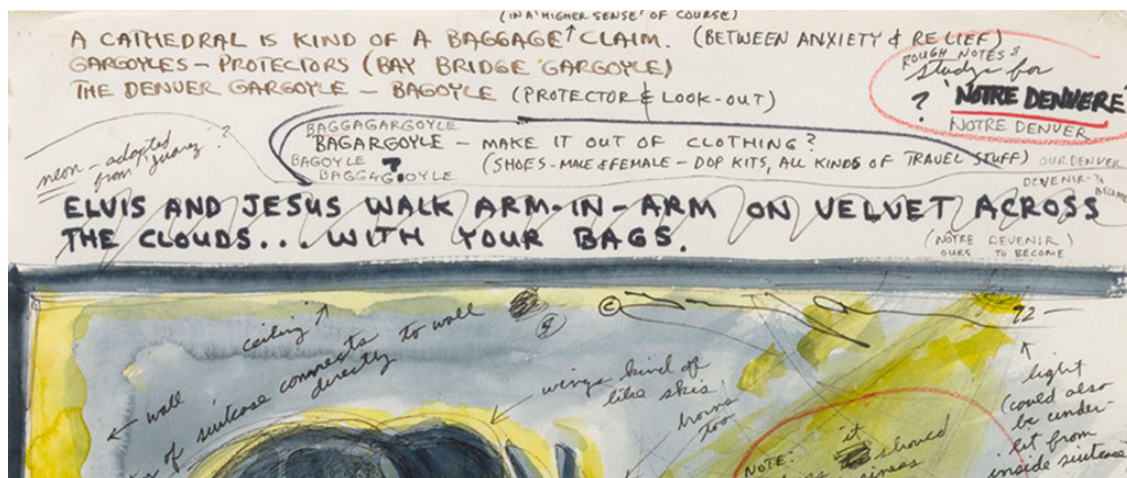


AD: I caught a line the other night – and I can't remember in exactly which song, I think in one of the new songs – the line "I heard the thunder in Fort Sumner." There's so many of those moments of internal rhyme or alliteration throughout your work, and I've always wondered if you think "that's a great little poetic moment. I need to build around that," or if it happens, like you say, as you're feeling your way through the idea?

Terry Allen: I think it happens. I can't remember really struggling to make things like that happen. A lot of times.

it'll take a long time to write a song, and a lot of times, for me, I'll be working on one, or two, or three songs. Working on multiple songs, and then all of a sudden I do something and realize I'm really working on *one* song, or vice versa. You're trying to make one song happen, and then split it in half and you realize "no, this is really two songs."

I think, also, that it's kind of like a voice. Like a writer, you're trying to find a *voice* to the particular song, or picture, or object, and you try to make it hold true to that voice. The words you choose, the images you choose, or the combination. Once you find it – and it's always a struggle just to find it – but once you do find it, then trying to hold it. I have a real hard time talking about things like that other than in real generalities, though, because – bottom line – it's a very mysterious thing that happens, I think, when you write a song, or make a picture. For me, it always has been.



AD: Speaking of the process of writing a song. The other night at Zebulon, you played a whole set of new works, and it seemed to me, in your descriptions song and the performances of the songs with Shannon and Bukka and Charlie and the band, that they were very collaborative, more collaborative in certain ways, than your previous work. And you mentioned co-writing with Joe Ely, and Dave Alvin, and Charlie, and Shannon. How are you approaching songwriting differently now, if at all, than previously?

Terry Allen: I don't think it's that different, but the circumstance of these songs was real interesting. Last July, we were invited by a guy that has a hotel in Marfa, and a theater, to just come and *do* something. I had a bunch of songs I was thinking about doing, and so we said, "we'll just get a bunch of songwriters together and come down there." He gave us rooms for like 10 days, and gave us the theater, and so we set up down there and everybody brought their notebooks. Joe and I were there the first night, and it was incredible. We just sat there, pretty much all night long, and sang songs to each other, which we have never really had the occasion to do, and it was really just a good time. Then Charlie came in the next day, and the next night Joe and Charlie and I did kind of the same thing, and we wrote a song called "All That's Left Is Fare Thee Well." So, Joe

had to leave, and Shannon and Bukka came in – Charlie stayed the duration – and we just started working on songs. That’s when we wrote “All These Blues Go Passing By,” and that was a *total* collaboration. Five people wrote that song. And then Jo Harvey pulled out a song that she had – and hummed it, because she doesn’t play an instrument – and we start playing it, and then Shannon starts singing it, and it became “Harmony Too,” so that’s totally Jo Harvey’s song.

I haven’t written that much with other people. I wrote a few with Guy Clark and I wrote with Will Sexton and a little with David Byrne, but that’s pretty much it. So anyway, that group of songs we were excited about, and then I had a whole bunch of songs that I’d written myself that I wanted to do with a band, so we went back in December and worked on arrangements for all of those songs. We had a show coming up at the Paramount Austin, and I knew I wanted to do the whole first set as all new songs. So that’s that’s kind of how that came about, which was very different for me.



And then we recorded them last May in Austin. We brought in a lot of strings. Glenn Fukunaga played stand up bass, bowed bass, cello, and it was all people that I've played with for forever. Charlie produced it. We co-produced it, but Charlie did all the dirty work. So it was new songs, but the same old humans. It was a different kind of angle of coming at this thing, and I'm really happy with the record. We're releasing it as a double album set with four songs each on three sides, and on the fourth side I did an etching. Brendan, from Paradise of Bachelors, he's really just been a huge contribution to...everything these last few years, starting with the re-issues for *Juarez* and *Lubbock*.

AD: He seems to certainly have an appreciation of the scope of the work, and of the, sort of, *tactile* nature of the

songs.

Terry Allen: He's the first person that's really made the connection between the visual, and the theater, and the language in songs, and had no problem with that being the reality of what I do. I've run into that thing, "Well, I like your artwork, but what is this music, what is this *country* music stuff?," and vice versa, "What's this art stuff?" But Brenden worked in a gallery. I met him when he was working in an art gallery in Philly. And he and Chris (Smith, also of Paradise of Bachelors), kind of dogged me... for about 6 years, about reissuing *Juarez*, but it was tied up at the time. So when all those licenses ended, I called him and said "Let's do it." I think it was a very good move on my part, because they did such wonderful jobs with the whole packages. He wrote these very extensive catalogs that went with the records, with essays, and with images from pieces that went with those periods of time, and I think that was a big motivation for the gallery, when they saw that. They came to see the show at the Paramount and they saw that, and they realized it was one thing to me, and that it could be presented as one thing, and that's kind of how this show culminated.

AD: Does this show synthesize for you, for the first time on this scale, these eras, or, as you say, these lifetimes?

Terry Allen: Not for me, but I think for a lot of other people, yes. Brendan even came and did a walk-through of the show, so there's been made a real, viable connection with the audio and the visual.

AD: And along with the show, there's a new cassette with some of your earliest recordings. And I remember there was a similar "Al's Grand Hotel" record that came out recently that was also issued with a gallery, or from the art world?

Terry Allen: Actually, Al (conceptual artist Allen Ruppersberg) and I put it out. There was a resurgence in some of his work, and in the Hotel, and some elements of it started showing, and they wanted to use the record as a soundtrack. But that music was lost for 30 years, and it was found in a closet. The guy that had Clean Records, Earl McGrath, they found those tapes in his closet. I had signed with Clean Records in '70, I guess, or '71, and it was a subsidiary of Atlantic. I remember their motto was "Every Man Should Have a Clean Record." I was on it, and Delbert McClinton, and one other band. They actually got records. Mine never came to fruition, but at the opening of Al's Hotel piece, they did bring in a Wally Heider mobile truck and recorded it, and that's where those recordings came from.

AD: It's a fascinating story that I've heard about this...

AD: It's been fascinating to hear that record, and this new cassette, to hear those songs in their earliest forms. To hear "Truckload of Art" in its infancy...

Terry Allen: And there were *Juarez* songs on it, where I was just sort of trying to work with those, to figure those out.

AD: It's amazing to hear, and then certainly to see this show – to see the germs of these ideas that manifest, and to be able to experience them holistically, it's a real gift.

Terry Allen: I think that's where you see – where it's kind of undeniable – that there is a through-line that happens for showing the nature of your necessity when you're making things. What you get drawn to. Where you let those different worlds take you. And I don't think you can see it unless it gets laid out in a chronology like they've got here. I'm kind of dumbfounded walking around it, because there are things that I have *no* memory of making, of where they came from.

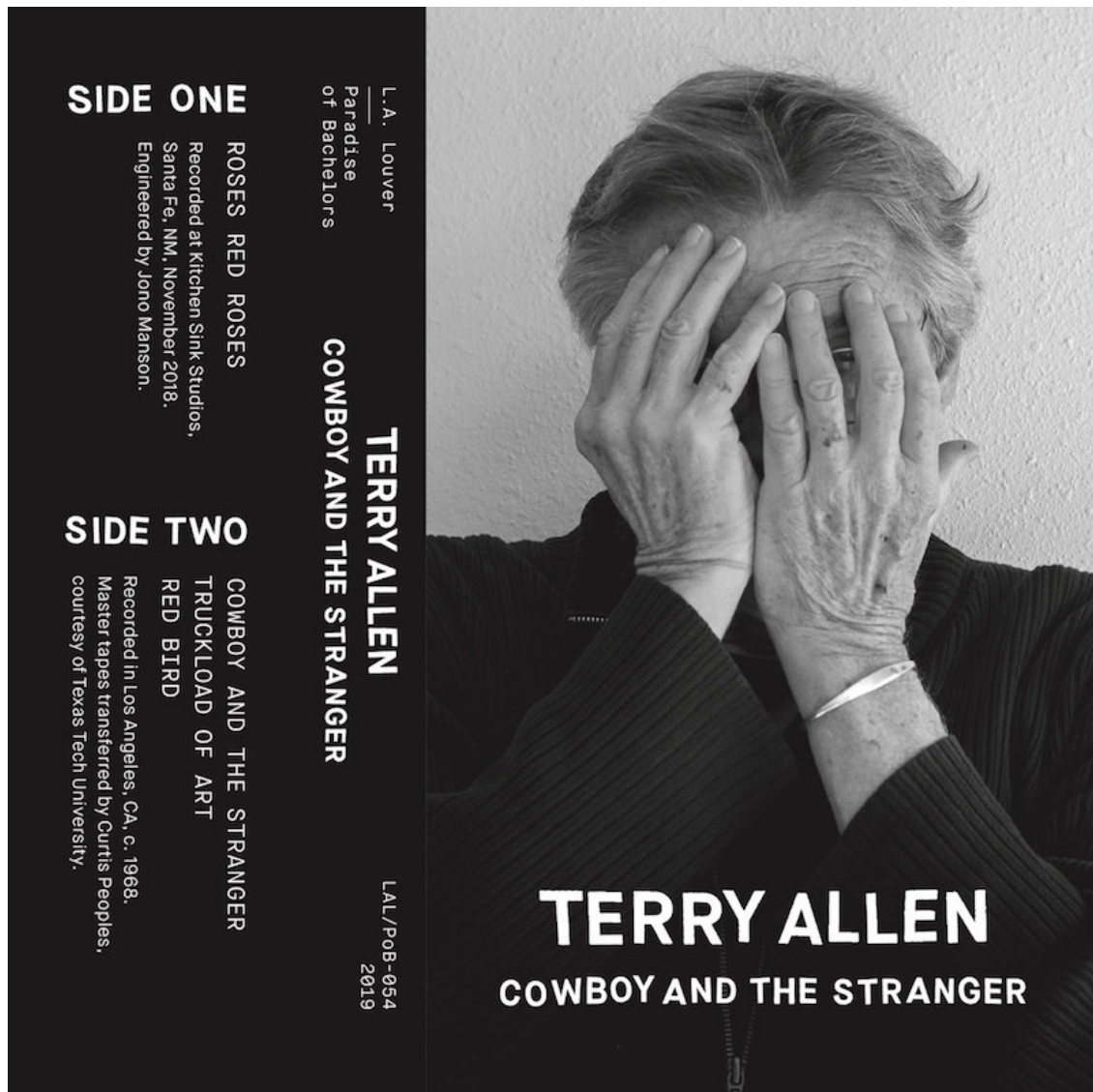


AD: Speaking of that, talk a little bit about some of the earliest pieces in the show?

Terry Allen: When I got out of Chouinard, I taught third grade for a year in Watts. It was a year after the riots, and a lot of teachers had quit down there, especially white teachers, and so they opened a program up to entice young people to come and teach. If you had a degree, and you passed an aptitude test, they gave you a two week crash indoctrination of what you're supposed to be as a teacher, which is incredibly absurd. So I wound up, for a year, with 50 kids in a class teaching 3rd grade. And it was an amazing education for me, but I remember the whole time, when I would get home, I would think "I've got to do my lesson plans," and get all of that stuff together, but then I would feel guilty if I wasn't working on *making* something, too, and I was constantly with my mind caught between "I wish I was in my studio working" and "I should be at the school for these kids", because – it was the 93rd Street School, which was one of the poorest schools in Watts at that time.

And after about a year, actually the summer after I quit, I started thinking. "Well, I've got to start making something and I couldn't figure out what to do. So I thought, "Well, I'm just going to illustrate the Bible." Typical Southern

desperation, right? So, I started doing these drawings and, of course the Bible immediately went out the window, but that was the first kind of thing just to open a door to walk into to start making things. I did a body of work that I showed to a dealer here, and I got a show at the Pasadena Museum, and then just started showing.



AD: With [Cowboy & The Stranger](#), one of the earlier pieces in the show and also the title of this new cassette, it seems like that's an early version of this kind of cross-medium inspiration?

Terry Allen: It was the first time that I consciously tried to figure out “How can you put music with the static image?” I would do a drawing that related to a song, and then I would record the song on reel to reel tape, put it in a box, and glue it to the back of the drawing so that people could play the song and look at the drawing. And that was kind of the first thing I could think of to do. And later when I actually did *Cowboy and the Stranger*, that body of work, when I showed it in San Francisco, I had a clutch of songs that went with these drawings, and they weren’t really just illustrations. The song kind of told one aspect, the drawing did another aspect, and I’ve always thought that what happens in the *middle* is what it was about. At the show I put a piano on rollers, on a platform, and people would pull me in front of each drawing and I would sing the song for that drawing and then they’d pull me to the next one to sing the song that went with that drawing. So it was kind of like a moveable concert that went with these drawings, and that led to working with *Juarez*. Just going at that pretty much full tilt. Taking that story, and that idea, and those characters, and building those songs. And they all kind of happened at once. It was a kind of an interplay of ideas, and images, and...various Hells.

AD: I’m curious about what’s inspiring you outside of your

own work? Are there any artists, or filmmakers, or songwriters that you're particularly interested in right now? I'm just always curious.

Terry Allen: Yeah, I listen to so many different things. I hadn't heard much of his work before, but Kurt Vile. I've started listening to his stuff, and I always go back to the original Kurt Weill, too, and *The Threepenny Opera*. I was thinking the other day, one of the records in the past that had a big impact on me was the soundtrack for a theater piece called *Marat/Sade*. It was about the Marquis De Sade putting on a play in an insane asylum with the inmates, but the soundtrack and the narrative is phenomenal, and I was thinking about that and I went back and started listening to that a little bit.



I think it's things like that that really activated my necessity to make something. There was a group called The Living Theater that Jo Harvey and I saw in the late 60s that had a huge impact on us, both musically and theatrically. We saw them do a piece called *Frankenstein and Antigone*. For *Frankenstein*, they built this huge figure out of their bodies, and it loomed out over the audience with a net and lights and it was just phenomenal. Those kind of things had an impact.

And the school I went to was it was pretty amazing, because it was the first time, after coming from Lubbock to LA, where I was around people where making work was a cold-blooded act. It was for real. To make a picture was for real, it wasn't something for a tourist attraction or a hobby. It was something that you needed to do in order to live. So, those kind of like-minded people that you ran into only encouraged you to be some kind of a criminal. I say criminal because I've always thought there are three things every artist is kin to – one is a criminal, because you break laws, one is a child, because you're innocent, and the other is insane, because you function on another plane, and those elements are always there, in the arts. words / [s brower](#)

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