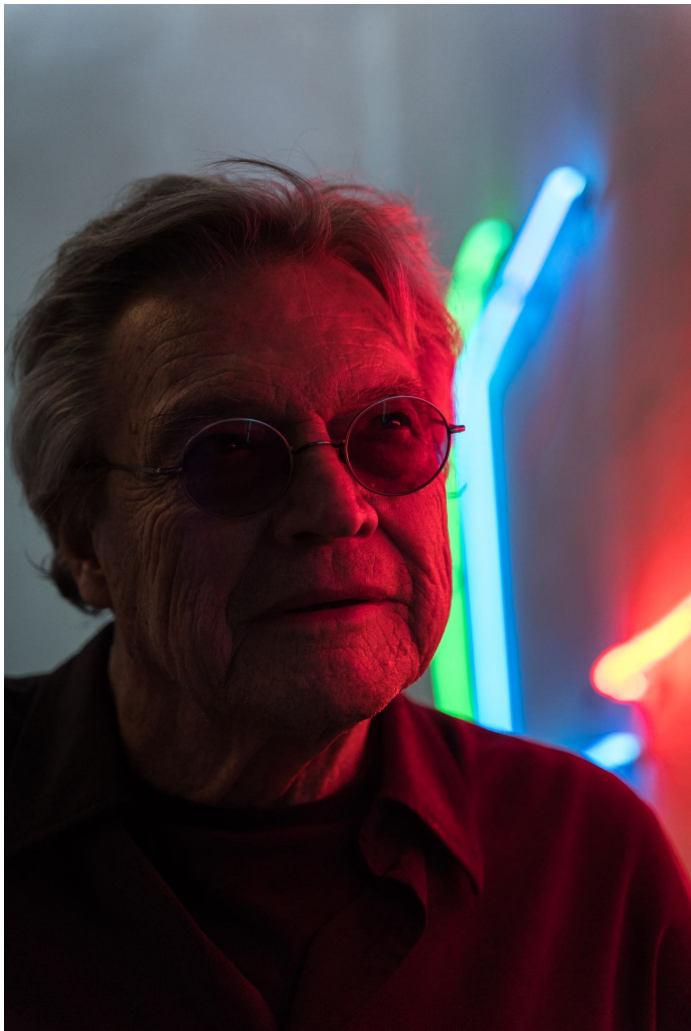


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Terry Allen Finally Gets His Due

The unclassifiable cult artist and musician has stayed under the radar for almost 50 years.

(Steven St. John for The Washington Post)

By **John Lingan**

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It's not usually this empty," Terry Allen explained a few days before Thanksgiving. We were standing in

the office foyer of his cavernous art studio at the western edge of Santa Fe. Pieces from Terry's half-century visual art career have been acquired by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, New York's Museum of Modern Art and the Hirshhorn, and been displayed at multiple international biennials. But as he nears 80, curators have started coming for his archives.

Texas Tech University, in Allen’s native Lubbock, had recently taken dozens of boxes, including hundreds of Terry’s journals — an unbroken daily record going back to his childhood. Only a few half-finished paintings remained on the walls. Some notebooks and sketches were strewn across his paint-spattered desk.

It might look like winding down, but Terry’s not one for misty-eyed reminiscing. Instead, I was visiting to discuss “Just Like Moby Dick,” his 13th album, released in late January. It’s his first record of new music in seven years and only his second this century, but it feels right on time. For five decades, as he produced his many paintings and installations, Terry has also sung off-kilter country songs about faded heroes, historical wounds and oncoming apocalypse — songs that have been covered by Lucinda Williams, Bobby Bare, Little Feat, Sturgill Simpson and Jason Isbell, among others. The lyrics on “Moby Dick” concern ghost ships, vampires, Facebook and the war in Afghanistan. In 2020, no veteran country songwriter sounds more attuned to the national mood.



Allen, center, performing in Austin in 2013. He released his 13th album, "Just Like Moby Dick," in January. (Rick Kern/WireImage)

Only recently has the greater world come to understand the fact that Terry's creations, whether sung or drawn or fabricated, are "all one thing," as he puts it. "You have five senses," he told me. "But you don't get up in the morning and say, 'Today I just smell.'" This past summer, his home gallery, L.A. Louver in Venice, Calif., showed a career-spanning exhibition of his drawings, "The Exact Moment It Happens in the West: Stories, Pictures and Songs From the '60s 'til Now." The Los Angeles Times's David Pagel [proclaimed it the show of the year](#), "so jam-packed with love, suffering and resilience that there's a good chance you'll be moved to tears." In 2016, Terry's first two albums, "Juarez" (1975) and "Lubbock (on everything)" (1979), were reissued by the independent Chapel Hill, N.C., label Paradise of Bachelors; last year, following those earlier records' ecstatic rediscovery, the label released "Pedal Steal + Four Corners," a compilation of his radio plays from the '80s and '90s.

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And now there's the enormous archive at Texas Tech, which draws on Terry's work and that of Jo Harvey Allen, an actress, playwright and poet, and Terry's wife of 57 years. Jo Harvey has acted in more than a dozen Hollywood movies, written and produced 14 of her own plays, and published a book of poems, much of this while raising their two sons, Bukka and Bale, who were born in the late '60s and are now a musician and artist, respectively. Her own studio is right next door on the same Santa Fe property, between Terry's hangar and the art- and photography-filled home that they have slowly expanded since moving in three decades ago.

The longevity of their relationship contrasts with the zigzag path they have cut through the arts, compelled by ideas and stories rather than career-building. This has granted them each a durable cult following, one that uniquely encompasses the coastal enclaves where they made their names and the rural flatland where they grew up. Yet it's also made them hard to market. This new era of institutional appreciation is a welcome break from the lean years they've experienced together. Like most artists, they've been through failure, frustration and financial hardship — but they've effectively embraced these challenges as the necessary costs of a mutual journey to become their truest selves.

Jo Harvey entered the office, aglow from a holiday haircut, and joined us at a small table in the fading light of the studio window.

It's been hard, she told me, to spend so much time looking through Terry's old love letters and her own diaries, revisiting her memories of Lubbock in the mid-1950s, when her notion of womanhood was limited to homemaking in "short white gloves and a girdle."

She has written many poems about their life together, my favorite of which contains this grateful stanza:

For I've seen your lines become our highways

Your forms house our history

And more than once

Content came true

The view from the studio stretched past Veterans Memorial Highway to the Colorado and Tetilla peaks a dozen miles out. The panorama of scattered yucca and pinyon bushes was bordered by snowy mountains, facing the sunset: a hard-earned bit of high-desert paradise. The theme of their partnership, like so much of their art, is survival through creativity, which may also explain their continued, growing relevance in a time of widespread struggle.

In her brash Texas drawl, Jo Harvey laughed about their many near-divorces as Terry observed her gesticulations with a wry smile. She was wearing a necklace that he gave her for their 55th anniversary, a large, hand-hammered medallion that reads, "It's amazing how long two people can misunderstand one another."



(Steven St. John for The Washington Post)

Terry first came to Santa Fe when he was barely school age, accompanying his mother to gigs at the La Fonda hotel on the city's famous downtown plaza. Pauline Allen played piano throughout the region, and some of Terry's earliest memories were

created in a front seat, watching the pavement fly by in the headlights' glow. "There was something about riding in the middle of the night, across that flat land, listening to the radio as loud as it could go," he says now. "It was my first real open door to what you'd think of as 'free.' I've never been able to think about sound in those days without thinking about motion."

Pauline was a genuine pathbreaker, an early-century white woman who lived for barrelhouse piano and was ostensibly expelled from Southern Methodist University for playing jazz with black musicians. Her love for music survived the incident, as did her sense of adventure. She eventually married Fletcher "Sled" Allen, a baseball player 20 years her senior who had been coaching minor league teams since a 14-game stint in the majors in 1910. He batted .130 for the St. Louis Browns.

The couple moved to the Texas Panhandle so Sled could manage the Lubbock Hubbers, and Terry was born in 1943, when his father was nearly 60 and Pauline was close to 40. Because of Sled's advanced age and his parents' penchant for risk-taking, Terry grew up in a house that brimmed with American mythology: His paternal grandfather fought in the Civil War, his mother was deeper into black music than most white people of the time, and his father spoke often about playing against Walter Johnson and Ty Cobb. But true familial connection was elusive. Pauline drank and played music; Sled worked and kept quiet.



In the 1950s, Sled turned to entertainment himself. He hosted Lubbock's first "cosmopolitan dance," which is to say, its first interracial one, featuring live music by Ray Charles. Young Terry watched the groups of black and white teenagers awkwardly congregate, conjuring an atmosphere so charged that one girl vomited from nerves. From there, Terry's father opened the Sled Allen Arena, which attracted touring musicians from Hank Williams to B.B. King, and which became a wrestling venue where Terry and Pauline took tickets and sold food during bouts.

"Terry's family was prominent," says Jo Harvey, who was also an only child in a clan that differed from his in every other way: socially conservative, boisterous, prone to wild storytelling, Texan going back generations. "Everyone knew Sled Allen. But I knew the secret that Terry was having a difficult time."

Their relationship started in motion, at a grade-school dance of their own, age 11. (“He mighta been 10,” says Jo Harvey, who is six months older.) But they didn’t become friends until high school, when “Terry would come to my house before and after his dates,” Jo Harvey says. They would talk on the phone late at night, and Jo Harvey would hide in her closet under a mound of coats so she didn’t wake her parents.

In 1959, Terry’s small family “self-destructed.” Sled died of cancer, Pauline began drinking even more and, as Terry recalls, “I was pretty much on my own from then on. Jo Harvey and a couple other friends saved me.”

By this point he was a convert to rock-and-roll, which was only natural for a kid from the same town as Buddy Holly. In later years he would often repeat a one-liner: “Lubbock is so flat that if you stare hard enough into the distance you can see the back of your own head.” Elvis and Bo Diddley exuded a wild stomping freedom that felt like a different planet from the oil country around him. That rhythm, that aggression, fed his anger and his need for escape.

“I went to one semester at Texas Tech and failed everything except writing and drawing,” Terry says. “I asked the drawing teacher if there were any schools like his class, and he told me about the Chouinard Institute” in Los Angeles. He applied immediately.

He and Jo Harvey were finally a couple by then, but he couldn't resist the highway. "Terry came over and told me he was leaving, going to California tomorrow," Jo Harvey recalls. "I went to a cotton field and screamed my head off."

At Chouinard, Terry fell into a community with pioneering artists like Ed Ruscha and Allen Ruppersberg. "That was a huge thing for me — finding out that you're not just totally whacked," he explains. But he was still green and provincial in those days, lacking any artistic influences beyond pulpy EC Comics and his uncles' "drunk tattoos," made from bamboo needles during naval travels in Manila. "In Lubbock, the only museums were full of farm implements," he says.

Los Angeles was where Terry began to bridge worlds. He was an aspiring draftsman who also played piano and worked blue-collar jobs. During shifts at an awning factory, he stole away to the bathroom to write rambling, love-starved letters to Jo Harvey on paper towels, six or seven a day on average. "They must have thought I had a horrendous intestinal problem," says Terry.

Jo Harvey lived for those letters and responded with canned goods and her own testimonials. Eventually he called from a hotel lobby pay phone to propose. She agreed, and he returned to the flatland for a wedding that Jo Harvey likes to say was attended by more than a hundred people, but only

Pauline attended from Terry's side. The couple had a fight before the rehearsal dinner that was bad enough for Jo Harvey to skip the event. They made up, then in the morning Terry threatened to leave the church through the window and jilt her. It was 1962. They were still teenagers.

The Allens drove back out to California, where they resolved to use their combined savings to live like royalty, consequences be damned. The high times lasted exactly one year, after which they had only five dollars to their name. They went to the Ambassador Hotel to buy a Los Angeles Times, a pack of cigarettes and two cigarette holders, then sat down to look at the classifieds. The experience established the feast-or-famine pattern they've endured ever since, but it also cemented a shared belief that adventurousness and joy should take precedence over common sense.



Terry and Jo Harvey Allen at Terry's "Road Angel" art installation, a bronze cast of a 1953 Chevrolet coupe, in Austin in 2016. (Todd V. Wolfson)

Los Angeles in the 1960s was the perfect place for a couple with their outlook and skills: They seemed to stay alive through optimism and friendship alone. “We would have no money, but suddenly a limo would pull up, full of artist friends, and take us to dinner,” Terry says.

Their decade was marked by such fateful twists. At Terry’s urging, Jo Harvey began to paint and write, and they took part in their first group show together at the Wilshire Bank in 1963. Two years later, at the end of a carpentry job, Terry was playing a customer’s piano while waiting for his check. The man liked the song he played, an original called “Red Bird” that Terry had written back home, and invited him to audition for “Shindig!” Terry made it on national TV, then graduated from Chouinard the following year. He had sold a few paintings and sketches by then, but he took a job teaching elementary school in the post-riot Watts neighborhood to cover the bills. He had a class of 50 students, many of whom couldn’t read, and he was tasked with teaching them math and “values,” two things he couldn’t have cared or known less about. “I wanted to make art,” Terry says, “but I had to make lessons for these kids who were preposterously in trouble.” He calls the experience “my first education about being in the real world.”

His main creative outlet at the time was a low-paying, part-time job making radio spots for new albums. For one typical ad, Terry wrote a script for Jo Harvey to read about Captain Beefheart, then tickled her on the floor while she recited it. They made dozens of these goofball exercises, enough to earn a spot on KPPC-FM 106.7, a literally underground station that broadcast out of the basement of Pasadena Presbyterian Church. On Sundays from 1967 to 1971, the pair hosted a popular show called “Rawhide and Roses” where they told stories, interviewed musicians and friends like Linda Ronstadt or the Holy Modal Rounders, and played music, mostly country. It was a breakthrough for Jo Harvey, who became known as the first-ever female country DJ. More important, she finally had a steady outlet for performing, and she soon had a theatrical agent. She also learned that the yarns she’d heard from her big Texas family were a genuine creative inheritance, a well of myth and language that she could draw on for personal expression.

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It was during these years that Terry made the first drawings in a years-long project that came to be known as “Juarez.” He had a fictional story in his head about two couples who meet in Cortez, Colo., and end up in a violent fight. The surviving pair flees to Mexico, pursued by police. He subtitled the album “A Simple Story,” but “Juarez” metastasized into paintings, prose and songs — a hat rack on which Terry hung his obsessions with violence, Southwestern history, racial conflict, personal freedom and doomed romance. He spent years developing the tale, performing and exhibiting small portions of it in Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York and Houston, until he recorded an LP version, performed mostly by himself on piano and vocals, that was released in a limited run of 1,000 copies in 1975.

“I’d never heard anything quite like ‘Juarez,’ ” says Brendan Greaves, a founder and curator at Paradise of Bachelors. More than 20 years ago, he worked at a Philadelphia gallery that exhibited some of Terry’s paintings. He didn’t even realize that Terry made music at first, but hearing the album offered Greaves “a completely new way of looking at country music, reflected through poetry and visual art.”

Greaves, who is decades younger than Terry and Jo Harvey, has become their foremost biographer and interpreter. He was recently nominated for a Grammy for his liner notes to the “Pedal Steal + Four Corners” reissue, and he’s at work on a book about Terry’s career. “Terry is not a visual artist in the way we think of that term,” says Greaves. “His work is untidy, it embraces everything. He would hate to be called a conceptual artist, but no one media can contain the stories he wants to tell.”

Greaves is only the latest keeper of the Allen flame. Like all successful artists, Terry and Jo Harvey have benefited from a loyal coterie of boosters and co-conspirators, including the award-winning critic and curator Dave Hickey, the screenwriter and director Joan Tewkesbury, and the legendary steel guitarist Lloyd Maines,

who has contributed to every one of Terry's records since his "Juarez" follow-up, "Lubbock (on everything)."

"Lubbock" is a double album with a loose theme for each side, which still qualifies as a low-concept project relative to his other work. Greaves says Terry's career has been defined by "long-running cycles or bodies of work," with "Juarez" being the prototype. There's

"Youth in Asia," his exploration of the cross-cultural impact of the Vietnam War, which spread across installations, sculptures in various media, including wads of chewed bubble gum, and an album.

"Dugout," a cycle of artworks and radio dramas based on his parents' lives, has been a radio play with original music as well as a book. And even his stand-alone work incorporates elements and images from other projects, as well as input from longtime collaborators. His outdoor installation "Road Angel," at the Contemporary Austin, consists of a bronze-cast 1953 Chevrolet coupe (Terry's first car) that plays a continuous loop of audio— songs, poetic readings, stories, all about Texas —contributed by dozens of close collaborators, including Joe Ely and Jerry

Jeff Walker, as well as Bukka, Bale and Jo Harvey. It's as if he cast those late-night rides with his mother in metal, soundtracked it with a lifetime of subsequent friendships, then left it to oxidize in the woods.

David Byrne, perhaps the only other contemporary American musician to carve out an equally prolific, multifaceted career in the visual arts and theater, contributed to "Road Angel" and many of Terry's other projects. The two met when Byrne was working on his Texas-set film "True Stories" in the mid-1980s and asked Joan Tewkesbury to recommend participants. Byrne might be the quintessential Manhattan artist, but his connection to the Texan couple was immediate. "Besides loving their personalities, I could see that here were some artists and performers that completely ignored the borders between music, art, theater, whatever it was," Byrne says. "That's kind of where I was going, and I thought, 'Look, there's some other people who do this. Let's follow them.'"

Byrne and his then-wife Adelle Lutz became close friends of Terry and Jo Harvey, often visiting them during the holidays in Fresno, Calif., where the family moved once Terry got an offer to teach college art in 1971. "I marveled at how tight they were as a family," Byrne told me. "Still are. I thought, 'I want to know how to do that.' They figured out how to have a strong family and a creative life. Everything was included, everything involved the whole family."



(Steven St. John for The Washington Post)

Back in the Allens' adobe home, artwork was everywhere. At one point they encouraged me to get on my knees and look under the dining room table, where I found a wooden skeleton built into the frame. The house is a museum

of a shared, boundary-less life, proof that the Allens can find the creative potential of any place, even a hidden one.

That day they were expecting a visit from Lutz, who is a renowned costume and textile artist in her own right and who would be staying for Thanksgiving dinner with Tewkesbury, a neighbor down the road. After the holiday, Terry and Jo Harvey were heading to Miami for another exhibition opening, where Terry would also perform a few songs with only his piano. The new album will send them to New York, L.A., Austin and D.C. for some rare gigs with the Panhandle Mystery Band, the name he's always given to whatever assemblage of musicians back him at that moment.

In a quiet moment like this, the couple's comedy dynamic is razor-sharp and infectious: Jo Harvey is proud, effusive, exuding love and warmth; Terry is her ornery inverse. Just by sitting there, hearing hours of their reminiscences, I could feel myself being pulled into the same whirlwind of love and beauty that had swallowed up Brendan Greaves and David Byrne. All too appropriately, the couple have matching tornado tattoos on their hands — a Lubbock regularity, repurposed as a metaphor for long-term partnership. The tattoos have become faded and misshapen with age.

Despite all the recent retrospection, “Just Like MobyDick” finds Terry still plowing forward, finding new ways to marry his personal memories to more universal concerns about looming catastrophe and societal decay. Many of the new songs were front-to-back collaborations, something he’s rarely done, including the first-ever co-written songs by the couple. His inner sanctum for this record included

Joe Ely and co-producer Charlie Sexton, who has played guitar for Bob Dylan for more than 20 years. Like everything Terry makes, it’s a thematically bleak affair, full of death and dark omens. But his trademark generosity remains: in the newfound openness to co-writing, in the singalong choruses, in the appropriation of real and imagined characters like Houdini or Brecht’s Pirate Jenny. His songs still feel like little guidebooks for staring down a harsh universe.

The album title comes from a line that Terry improvised while singing its resigned final song, “Sailin’ on Through.” It was just a passing phrase, like a stray slash in a drawing, but he soon found himself considering his affinity for the archetypal American monster. “Instead of Ahab and all the psychological stuff, I thought about the whale,” he says. Moby-Dick isn’t only a predator, he’s pocked and battered from an eternity of battle: “Harpoons lie all twisted and wrenched in him,” [Ahab says](#) to his Pequod crew at one point.

Jo Harvey watched Terry from a separate chair, still in thrall like a teenager in the most endearing way. Back when they began dating, “there was always this sense of making it up, play,” she said. “He’d pick me up for a date and all he’d say was, ‘Run!’ He’d peel off and suddenly our whole date was a game, running from ‘the sonsabitches.’ ”

Terry played it all down. “That kind of desperation is easy in Lubbock. There wasn’t any prefabricated fun. You made your own toys.”

“We’ve always had a great time, though,” she replied. Terry let out a small, shocked laugh: “No, we haven’t. But we’ve always got through the s---.”

John Lingan is the author of

“Homeplace: A Southern Town, a Country Legend, and the Last Days of a Mountaintop Honky-Tonk.”

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