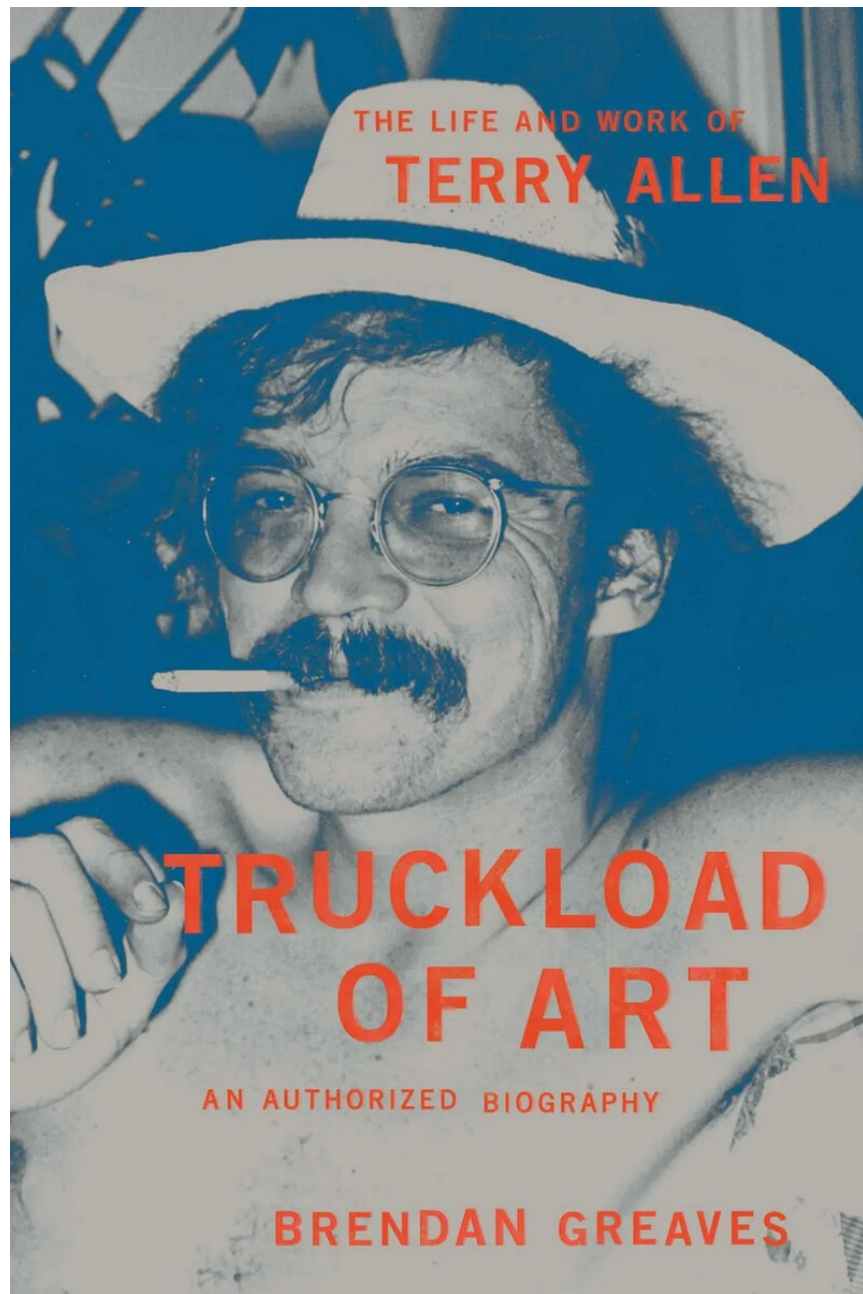


*Aquarium
Drunkard*

Truckload Of Art: The Life and Work of Terry Allen



For more than fifty years, [Terry Allen](#) has navigated an artistic path that bears little resemblance to the flat straightaways of his Lubbock youth. He's traveled a winding and wandering highway that occasionally loops back on itself, switching lanes between songwriting, visual art, theater, sculpture, and other media, sometimes straddling two lanes at once. Prolific, profane, and voracious, he's spent decades flourishing outside the mainstreams of the art world and the music world, save for occasional moments when the mainstream happens to intersect with his intuitive route. There's a good chance he's your favorite artist's favorite country singer, or your favorite country singer's favorite artist.

Allen has been a catalyst in fertile creative scenes from Los Angeles and Lubbock, he's worked alongside everyone from Guy Clark to Dave Hickey to Bruce Nauman to David Byrne, and in the process, he's created a massive and multivalent body of work that has no antecedents and very few points of comparison. In short, he's long overdue for a thorough biography. Fortunately, [Truckload Of Art: The Life and Work of Terry Allen](#), Brendan Greaves' 500+ page epic released on Hachette Books on March 19th, is a worthy study of a more-than-worthy subject. Greaves, head of the North Carolina-based Paradise of Bachelors record label that has been reissuing Allen's early albums and releasing his new work over the past decade, is a compassionate biographer with the perceptive eye of an art critic that allows him to map the aforementioned highway of Allen's artistic practice.

The book is broken into the three distinct periods that characterize Allen's life – a childhood in Lubbock, Texas, where he pushed against the constraints of the conservative and art-starved town, a post-high school escape to California, where he spent decades raising a family and making art with his wife and closest collaborator Jo Harvey, and a mid-life move to Santa Fe, where they've resided ever since. Much of Allen's work revolves around the complicated mythologies we are born into – those of our family, those of the place we're raised, and those of our time. *Truckload of Art* provides vital context to the way in which Allen's life has been transmuted into his art. We sat down with Greaves to discuss this exhilarating investigation of a life spent in the act of constant creation. | [w furgeson](#)



Aquarium Drunkard: In the book you explain that you first met Terry through your work at a Philadelphia art gallery in the early two thousands. And much later you got him onto the roster at Paradise of Bachelors and you've been working on the reissues [*Juarez, Lubbock (on everything)*, etc.]. So I have a pretty good sense of how y'all came to know each other and became close. But how did y'all decide that you were going to be the one doing the book? Did he approach you or did you approach him?

Brendan Greaves: It was fortuitous because it was really kind of a mutual request. In 2018, we were already in the thick of working on reissuing Terry's back catalog and he was already working on new music that would become *Just Like Moby Dick*. By that point I'd already written a fair amount about him both for the reissue liner notes, and really dating back to when I was in grad school at UNC for Folklore, that was when I first started writing about Terry's work. And when we first started talking in a way that was more than just chatting. That was 2006. I had been thinking about the fact that there was no book. There's a great art monograph on UT Press that is called *Terry*

Allen that has incredible images of his work and some really great essays by people like Dave Hickey and Marcia Tucker, friends of his over the years. But it barely addresses the music and the music is kind of an afterthought. And that's sort of it. All the other books on him were essentially art catalogs. There was nothing that really dealt with the music in a way that was equal to the artwork. And then when you look at journalism about him in recent years, it's sort of the opposite. A lot of it is about the music and not as much about the artwork. That balance has always been a source of irritation to Terry, that folks see the work as different or segregated by medium. He doesn't care if there are people who just like his music or just know his music or people that just like his art. That's not it. It's just that people don't see the relationships between the two things, or are dismissive toward one or the other practices. So that has been an ongoing concern for him. So I'd been thinking of this idea – this book doesn't exist, could I write it? Would that be even feasible? Does he even want it to exist? And then at the same time Terry had been approached about a long form piece about his music, and he was anxious that it was just going to be about the music. So he was telling me about that, and at some point on the phone, I just blurted out, "Well, you know, I could just write the book." And he said, "Oh, well, I wish you'd do that. Let's do that."

AD: I could just write a 540 page book about you.

Brendan Greaves: Right. Well, I didn't know it was going to be that long. And once I said that my heart sort of sank. I was like, what have I gotten myself into? So that's how it started. And we took it from there and for well over a year we talked once or twice a week for an hour to three hours and all those conversations are recorded. There's a lot I knew before then, but we went really deep, year by year pretty much throughout his entire life. And, obviously that, formed the kind of the core of the book as far as me using his own words and his own memories. And then weaving that with the actual historical evidence and other people's accounts.

AD: The book is framed within these three sections that correspond to his life's geographies (Lubbock, California, and Santa Fe). I of course wasn't in California in the 1960s and 1970s and I've been to Santa Fe just a couple times. But I've spent a lot of time in Lubbock and I was impressed with your ability to capture what it's like. How did you go

about absorbing and understanding those places? Did you just camp out in each place for a few months?

Brendan Greaves: That's a good question. The weird thing about this book is that my book deal with Hachette was finalized at the very beginning of the pandemic. I'd been working on some research before then and I'd written an extensive book proposal that itself was over 100 pages to pitch to potential publishers and editors. My agent sorted everything out right at the beginning of the pandemic. I knew I had a little bit of money as an advance to cover traveling around and researching, but suddenly I couldn't go anywhere at all. I had this plan for extensive travel and lots of in-person interviews and that all had to pivot into Zoom world mostly. And then some phone work. At the time I was really anxious about that and disappointed. But it worked out, I ended up probably talking to more people than I would have just because it's easier to get somebody on a computer than it is to find them in person. So it ended up being fine.

But as far as travel, before I started the book, I'd been to Lubbock a few times briefly. And I'd also been to Santa Fe to visit Terry and Jo Harvey. And I lived in Albuquerque for a short time many years ago. So I knew Santa Fe through that experience a bit. And during the lull in the pandemic, I took a long trip to Lubbock and Santa Fe. I was in Lubbock for a few weeks and I was embedded in [the Allen archives](#) at Texas Tech. It was an odd experience because it was during the pandemic. It was also during the summer. I was alone in this enormous reading room just poring through this stuff and photographing it. I have like hundreds of thousands of images of his notebook pages, because how else was I supposed to remember? I didn't have enough time. So I photographed everything that seemed important. And that was another really central source to telling the story. Terry was there for part of my time in Lubbock. We'd been there before together but in the context of concerts and official appearances at Tech and this time we just kind of drove around and he gave me a tour of places, we ate at places he liked to eat, we went to places he hung out as a kid. So I got a sense of Lubbock then.

Los Angeles I know just from being there, you know, music stuff, art stuff, I have a lot of friends who live there. I still have not been to Fresno, so that part was sort of imaginary. And then, you know, I did

do a whole lot of historical research into those places. Less so Santa Fe and Fresno, but a lot of LA – what LA in the sixties was, beyond the mythology, what it actually was. And then I did a ton of research on Lubbock because that seemed really important for framing it.

AD: There's stuff you found that must have been deep in the archives of the *Lubbock Avalanche-Journal*. You know, here's an ad for [Terry's father] Sled Allen's venue, here's the exact movie that was playing on this night, all that stuff. I was amazed by the depth of research that went into figuring out exactly what was happening then.

Brendan Greaves: The *Avalanche-Journal* was kind of incredible. I've never looked that closely at the archives of a single paper. Papers back then, in the forties and fifties for sure, and even into the sixties, you know, they're published twice a day and they reported on things like a five year old's birthday party, it was like a real community bulletin board in a way that newspaper were not for very long after that. That was the only source people had so it covered absolutely everything, including gossip, like, who was dating who in high school. Really bizarre stuff that you would never see now, you know?

AD: I was recently reading the section of the book that details the recording of the *Lubbock (on everything)* album, and that's the first mention of Lloyd Maines, Richard Bowden, all those guys who were involved in the recording. I was at the show at the Paramount the other week [Terry Allen and the Panhandle Mystery Band play an annual show at the Paramount Theater in Austin] and both of those guys are still in the band, and there are all these other friends that sort of run through the book. People that he and Jo Harvey have had decades-long, mostly fruitful, occasionally contentious, friendships with. Were the interview subjects pretty cooperative and excited about the project?

Brendan Greaves: Yeah. I mean, that was a process. I assembled a long list of people that I thought I should speak to and then Terry kind of did the same and edited mine and said, oh, you don't need to talk to this person or you need to talk to this other person. In some cases I listened to him and, and others, I didn't. But then as I dug into the research, suddenly there were other characters who popped up who I thought, if they're living, I really need to talk to this person. There

were a few people who I regret not being able to get in touch with. You can't speak with everyone. Some people died during the writing of the book which gave it more urgency. There were a few folks who Terry had contentious relationships with that I couldn't track down. But everybody else was pretty thrilled about it and saw the need for the book to exist.

Scheduling that many conversations was insane but once I actually got on the line with people the process was fairly simple and generally pretty fruitful. Some people are better talkers than others. But it was interesting the way that certain interviews you think are going to be important don't yield what you need and you end up relying on other interviews with people that you didn't think were going to be central to the story. Just because of how their memory works or how they express themselves or how chatty they are. It was fun. I feel like I got to know a lot of people. Some of those calls were pretty nerve-racking for me but I got through them all. It was important to have all those voices, even though in the end, a lot of it ended up being background and I was not necessarily quoting those conversations.

AD: One of the things that comes through at numerous points during the book is this kind of like Zelig-like quality that Terry had, because of the people he ran around with and the places he was and the times he was there. Were there particular people that you were surprised had a Terry Allen connection? Realizing that he was like one degree away from Charles Manson was a surprise.

Brendan Greaves: I know. That's the big one. I don't think I had heard those stories until they came out during the interview process. I had heard a lot of stories before then but that was one that I don't think I had been aware of. I didn't know that they had met Andy Warhol, that was kind of interesting. And then there's connections to the cinema world – Dennis Hopper and Jack Nicholson makes an appearance. It's interesting the folks that thread through that story, especially in the LA section, it was such an electric time and so many things were happening in such a concentrated way and so quickly and tumultuously in that city. People were rubbing shoulders in ways that are maybe less common now. Intersections of people and scenes were maybe at a different frequency. And you know, Terry and Jo Harvey are also very social beings. They really put themselves out there and

they were involved in radio, music industry, the art world. They like having parties, they like having people over dinner, they like going over to people's places for dinner. They were in the mix in a really active way. The story of Peter Duel, I knew only tangentially. He had been mentioned to me before. But that story became much deeper during the interviews for the book and realizing how close they were. And after that LA period, Fresno becomes so different because suddenly other than the university scene, they become much more isolated.

AD: Although it seems like that's the point when they start going all over the place, showing art in galleries across the world, staging different shows.

Brendan Greaves: Yeah, at that point, it doesn't matter as much where home is, because home is a place that they chose because it's a stable job, a paycheck, health insurance and a good place for the kids to grow up and go to school. By the time they're in Fresno, both their careers are becoming much more viable and they were constantly on the road.

AD: The book really centers his relationship with Jo Harvey and gave me a much greater appreciation for what has been a nearly lifelong collaboration. How did your working relationship with her evolve as opposed to the relationship with Terry?

Brendan Greaves: I did a number of interviews just with Jo Harvey. Not as many as with Terry, but probably at least a dozen. I'd become close to her anyway just from being in Santa Fe and being at their anniversary parties in Marfa. They tend to travel pretty much everywhere together these days, they're kind of a unit. And she's very different from Terry, as you probably see in the book, just as far as personality and presence. She's like totally wide open in a way that he isn't quite. And her memory also works differently, too. So it was interesting trying to reconcile their sometimes contrasting memories of things. Before I really started writing I knew that that relationship, that marriage, had to be central to the book. And also that it was singular as far as a story in its own right, that these two artists have been together for so long and collaborated for so long. It's extremely

unusual. It's hard to think of anybody else that has lasted that long, romantically and artistically.

So at one point, I told Terry, one way to frame this book is not necessarily as a biography, but more as just an account of your marriage. And he very unequivocally said, no, thank you. (Laughs.) So that was the end of that. I think it speaks to the nature of their marriage, which is incredibly warm and loving but also very intense and complicated like anybody's is. The idea that they would have to negotiate and share the narrative of a book together, I think just seemed insane to him. But it ended up happening anyway.

AD: Most of the people I know who are Terry Allen fans know him first and foremost as a musician. But you first came into contact with him through his visual art. And now through the reissues and the years of research you did for the book, you've seen it all. In your opinion, what is the essential piece of Terry Allen art, the work that epitomizes his entire output?

Brendan Greaves: I mean the easy answer would be to consider a body of work and then the obvious one would be *Juarez*. That's sort of a cop out because that's fifty or fifty-five years of art work in various media. But it is all of a piece, and it's certainly the body of work that is most central to his career and practice as an artist in every medium. And I think it's arguable that it's the primary engine of his identity as an artist. It's been something that's preoccupied him, not always, but often, and off and on, since about 1968. I think that story, that simple story and all the kind of mythology and heraldry and iconography and language and numerology and history that surrounds it, is both deeply personal and also political in a way that isn't often touched on. Just as far as thinking about the southwest of the United States and the porous border with Mexico, both geographically and culturally, that has always existed, and border violence. It's very much about those issues without being explicitly about them.

AD: What's next for you in the world of Terry Allen? Is there more stuff planned for *Paradise of Bachelors*? And I'm also curious, now that you've got this one under your belt, what's next for you as an author? Are you already working on the next book?

Brendan Greaves: On the immediate horizon, as far as more projects with Terry, we're releasing his first ever professional recordings, the "[Gonna California](#)" / "[Color Book](#)" single. That'll come out just a few days before the book. Those songs have been heard by very few people. Most of the records were lost in a warehouse fire shortly after the record was pressed. So that's exciting. And we're finally making available a digital version of *Cowboy and the Stranger*, which is an EP of his early songs from the same period. He's working on a lot of new music with his family in a family band called Blood Sucking Maniacs. And then also his own Panhandle Mystery Band material too.

And there's still stuff from the back catalog that we haven't gotten to, but would like to. I'm not sure in what form that will manifest. But at the moment I'm slammed with book promotion stuff and he's slammed with some of the same, moving around with me to various places for events and readings.

As far as writing, I don't know, I've been messing around with some things but I don't have anything coherent. It's funny, it's like you think the book is done when it's done, but then there's trying to schedule readings and concerts and there's a ton of coordination, getting it out into the world. I wasn't quite prepared for that. But I'd like the next thing to not be a biography. Maybe fiction.

<https://aquariumdrunkard.com/2024/03/18/truckload-of-art-the-life-and-work-of-terry-allen/>