

## Upfront and Real With Robert Earl Keen.

By Michael Israel Gorelic



Sit and have a conversation with Robert Earl Keen and you will learn more about music than you could ever just by going to shows. The Robert Earl Keen band just got back from playing the Stage Coach Festival, the Country version of Coachella that is held out in California. Sitting in the back of the Lincoln Theater talking to this man who is graying from the road, whose eyes look bloodshot, but whose voice never got tired of talking about the band, the road, the music industry and his relationship with Lyle Lovett he described the recent tour to me when I asked him how it's been going? "I'm a touring band, Here's the thing Michael, I'm not unlike BB King or Dylan, I've been doing this shit for twenty years, 120 days a year and in between I make records, this tour that we're on started back in 1987 and I don't know when it's

gonna end." There was a certain childlike gleam in his eyes when he spoke of it like that, almost as if stopping wasn't in his vocabulary. The conversation the in depth answers and the sincerity started there. What a pleasure it was to sit and have a talk with someone who knew what it was like to work hard at his craft, to start out with nothing and build momentum.

Today Robert plays to a diverse group of people, "I used to make this joke, that I was like the Milton Bradley game of entertainment, I'm good from 8 to 80." Things have certainly changed from when Robert first started. First playing for a small following that built itself up to frat guys in college. When they all graduated Robert found a new audience and so his shows are like a smorgasbord of people all thrown together for the one common love of good song writing. "Listen I write songs" Robert says, "And I think when people finally get over the fact that I can't sing worth a shit they listen to me and say hey, his songs are worth a shit." Robert started writing at the young age of 5. He wrote poetry, he called it "idiot savant stuff." His first poem being about a beautiful seashore full of waves crashing and birds flying, Robert explained, "the only water I knew was Galveston which was this hot chocolate milk thing and there were only a few seagulls, so it was my imagination that came to me." And it's been his imagination that has kept him going for so long. He feels like he falls into the category of songwriters like; Malcolm Holcombe and Greg Brown and Taz Van Sant. But it didn't come easily. "There was a time that everything I was writing sounded like high school poetry and I was like shit, who am I trying to impress with this shit?" But since then he has gone on to record a live album at the Ryman, Country heaven to most, but he wouldn't describe himself as

strictly country. One comment he gets the most at shows are, “My friends dragged me here to see you and I loved you and I don’t even like country.”

In between the start and the now there have been many twists and turns that have befallen Robert, His dislike for the music industry was hard to ignore in the interview. He’s fed up with the lies they tell you, he says, “there’s no imagination, they live in an old model.” He even had to make the Ryman album himself. Robert talks of how he used to be wide-eyed and optimistic until one day when he was releasing his first album another label released a compilation album. By the time Robert was recanting this tale he was almost spitting, “two records showing up on the same day, you can almost shoot yourself in the foot.” That’ll teach me to ask a traveled musician what they think of the music industry.

Today Robert’s band consists of five players. Including a steel guitar and keyboard player. The line-up has changed throughout time. Robert first started out acoustically, like his good friend Lyle Lovett did, Robert referred to Lyle’s playing style as “self contained.” He was eager to try that type of playing too, but as he found, the sound kept getting bigger. So he got together a band that had an upright bass player and drums and then he got someone to play the steel guitar and all of a sudden the sound didn’t just seem bigger it was bigger and he was no longer self contained, which doesn’t mean he didn’t take care of his band. Robert is reportedly the only one in music who offers insurance to his band. He said when asked by the Economist about this odd introduction of health care and rock-n-roll, “ musicians get sick and they need to play so you keep your band healthy and they can play.” Makes sense to me; maybe the United States should adopt Robert’s Health care plan?

When speaking of his long time friend Lyle Lovett, he had only good things to say. They met while attending Texas A & M in College Station, Texas. Lyle would ride his bike past Robert’s house everyday. “He lived behind a church and he was really into health at the time and after a couple of months of riding past us listening to us play on the porch he stopped and asked if he could play.” So he did and then he started this basement coffee house on campus where they had shows and they where even able to scrounge up enough cash to get Shake Russell and Nancy Taylor to play there, but mostly it was used by the local musicians to test their chops. The two became friends and would often stay up all night just talking. Robert said, “It’s rare to meet someone in life who you can keep talking to.” I know what he means very well. I enjoyed my time with Robert, I wish him tons of success. Keep playing man, and don’t loose sight of the prize. The music.