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Friday, February 14, 2003

The road goes on to Aggieland

By True Brown THE BATTALION

There are a couple of venues that Robert Earl Keen always looks forward to playing. While concerts in Santa Cruz, Calif., and Colorado have an edge in scenery and weather, there is only one place that Keen considers his home: College Station.

His first homecoming in more than a year and a half is tonight, when he takes the stage in Rudder Auditorium. He is also playing Saturday night, and tickets are still available at the MSC Box Office.

The concerts will be just the third and fourth of the month for Keen, who said he always enjoys coming back to play in College Station, the place where he first started playing guitar some 25 years ago.

"It's always like coming home to me," said Keen, a 1980 graduate of Texas A&M. "If there was a coming of age movie about my life, it would be set in College Station, because I really didn't know squat when I got there. I learned everything I know there, so it's always like a homecoming."

While he has released several studio albums, Keen's signature has always been his live performances, which range from playing in front of 60,000 at the Astrodome to more intimate venues all over the United States. His live 1996 album "No. 2 Live Dinner" is a standard in the CD rotation of Texas music fans, and is the trademark of a prototypical Keen concert.

Richard Lindner, a junior construction science major, has seen Keen play at Floore's Country Store in San Antonio and Gruene Hall in New Braunfels. At those shows, Lindner said, Keen played to an up-tempo crowd.

"The crowds are so into it when he plays in Texas," Lindner said. "During the song 'Five Pound Bass,' I remember the band turned it into a 10 or 15 minute jam. People were climbing up on each other's shoulders and having a good times."

Keen has, however, been known to sit on a bar stool onstage, tell stories and give a more laid back performance at venues like Bass Performance Hall in Fort Worth and smaller theaters in the northeast.

Either way, fans rarely leave disappointed.

Brandon Turner, a junior electrical engineering major, was one of the first in line last month when tickets went on sale for this weekend's concerts. Turner saw Keen in Virginia last summer, and said it was different than the types of shows he had seen him do in Texas.

"We got there about five minutes before the show started and walked up and got tickets on the third row," Turner said. "We went in and sat down and there was maybe 50 people."

Turner said that while the show was very laid back, it was entertaining to see Keen in a different atmosphere.

"Keen came out and gave a mellow but stellar performance. He played songs for an hour and 15 minutes and talked for about 45," Turner said. "He just talked and told jokes, and sat on a bar stool the whole time. He told us all the stories of where his songs came from, so it was a great show."

For Keen, the type of show he likes to play usually depends on what his touring schedule has been like leading up to the concert.

"Sometimes when I come off the road when I've played a lot of theaters and it's quiet, it's a real relief to come to a show where we're pounding out the music and trying to stay ahead of the wave of the crowd," Keen said. "On the other hand, when I've just been pounding the pavement, it's nice to be able to hear yourself. "That's what's great about Rudder, is shows can go either way there."



PHOTO COURTESY OF METROACTIVE.CO. Robert Earl Keen will perform tonight in Rudder Auditorium at 8 pm

Tickets can be purchased at the MSC Box Office or by calling 845-1234. For Keen, his diversity in concert types is a telling microcosm

of the way the Texas singer-songwriter movement has evolved over the last quarter of a century.

It is easy trace the current Texas country music craze to Keen. When he moved to Austin in 1980 the city was just starting to buzz with the blues music of singers like Stevie Ray Vaughan.

"Austin had become this major blues scene," Keen said. "People like Marcia Ball and Delbert McClinton were playing a over, so there was a lot of blues. It was great for me because I hadn't had much exposure to blues. The Texas singer-songwriter thing wasn't really happening at all yet, so I moved to Nashville in 1985."

His stint in Nashville only lasted two years, and Keen found himself in Bandera in 1987.

Without a band of his own, he toured with legendary songwriters Townes Van Zandt and Guy Clark.

From there, Keen had an awakening

"I figured out that after a certain bit of time that I was going to need to playing some bigger venues besides coffee houses and small beer joints," Keen said. "After I built up a band people came to see me in these big places like Billy Bob's, and The Backyard in Austin or Wolf Pen over in College Station.

"Then all of a sudden, a lot of people came on the scene who were part of the Texas music scene. For my part, I think my biggest contribution was opening up some bigger venues to people, because previous to that, people would only hire national touring acts. Then, they found out that they could hire more local acts and be just as successful."

And they have been successful, as acts like Keen, Pat Green at Cross Canadian Ragweed now get exposure nationwide, and seed other bands are right on their heels.

"I certainly want a lot of attention on Texas music," Keen said, "There's a lot of music that comes out of Texas. So every time the spotlight goes on Texas, it's good for everybody."



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By Tr The B

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