



Various Artists including Robert Earl Keen “**Undone**” Thirty Tigers Records

The sub-title of this 2CD, twenty-seven song collection is “**A Musicfest Tribute To Robert Earl Keen,**” and it was recorded in-concert on 8th January 2008 at MusicFest in Steamboat Springs, Colorado – three days before Robert Earl turned 52. Spread across a week during early January, this annual country music festival began in 1986.

With one exception, the aforementioned songs were mostly penned [and a few co-penned] by English major and Aggie graduate Keen, who began his recording career back in 1984 with “**No Kinda Dancer.**” Now Austin based, Oregon formed combo Reckless Kelly are currently signed to Sugar Hill Records, one of Robert’s early carer labels. They launch Disc 1 with “Think It Over One Time,” which originally appeared on the Sugar Hill release “**No. 2 Live Dinner**” [1996]. Max Stalling is also an Aggie graduate [Food Science], and he contributes the title track from Keen’s solo debut. Subsequent covers from that collection include “Christabel” [Matt Skinner], “Front Porch Song” c/w mid-song spoken interlude [Dub Miller], while Muzzy Braun, father of Reckless Kelly founders Willy [vocals/guitar] and Cody Braun [vocal/fiddle], appears on Disc 2 accompanied by his other boys Micky and Gary in a performance of “Willie.”

Keen was born and raised in Houston, and contributions by Texas bred pickers abound on this collection. Wade Bowen covers “Lynnville Train” from “**Gringo Honeymoon**” [1994], Walt Wilkins – Sam Baker’s producer – pitches in with “Paint The Town Biege” the lyric name checking the album it appeared on [“**A Bigger Piece Of Sky**” [1993]], while, supported by Cody Braun, the husky tremulous voice of Kathleen Braun tackles “I’m Coming Home” [“**Gringo Honeymoon**”]. Also Houston born – but trailing sixteen years behind Robert - Cory Morrow is accompanied by Tanya Cargill on “I’ll Go On Downtown” [“**The Live Album**” [1988]]. Closing Disc 1, Texas western swing fiddler Doug Moreland glides and slides his way through “Daddy Had A Buick” [“**A Bigger Piece Of Sky**”].

While it ain’t Texas, Oklahoma is close. Tulsa being where, the now Austin based, Brandon Jenkins was raised and he reprises the title cut from “**What I Really Mean**” [2005], while Josh Grider who hails from Las Cruces, New Mexico tackles “I Wonder Where My Baby Is Tonight” [“**Picnic**” [1997]]. From even farther afield, but an Austin resident these days, Virginia raised Matt Powell delivers “Travelin’ Light” [“**Walking Distance**” [1998]].

At the outset, the formula on Disc 2 replicates Disc 1. Hailing from Stillwater, Oklahoma – the ancestral home of *Red Dirt Music* - Jason Boland tackles “Mariano” [“**West Textures**” [1989]]. Another musician who served an apprenticeship in Stillwater bars is Cody Canada of Cross Canadian Ragweed, and his pick is “Shades Of Gray” [“**Picnic**”], while from the same collection ‘honorary Texan’ Chris Knight – bred in Kentucky - reprises the title song of this tribute collection. Texans contributing to the second disc include Bonnie Bishop’s take on “Not A Drop Of Rain” [“**Gravitational Forces**” [2001]], while Darren Kozelsky heads for “Corpus Christi Bay” [“**A Bigger Piece Of Sky**”] and Houstonian Rich O’Toole tackles “Love’s A Word I Never Throw Around” [“**West Textures**”].

Closing Disc 2 are five contributions from Robert Earl Keen and his band. Bookending the set are the “**Gravitational Forces**” tunes, “Wild Wind” and the boisterous “The Road Goes On Forever,” while “**Gringo Honeymoon**” supplies Robert’s second offering “Dreadful Selfish Crime.” It’s followed by the previously unrecorded “Goodbye Cleveland,” then “For Love” which surfaced on the Keen retrospective

“Best” [2006]. Alluded to in Kerrville Folk Festival founder Rod Kennedy’s liner notes, but conspicuously missing from this collection are examples of Robert Earl’s humorously wayward compositions. For example, “The Five Pound Bass” and “Swervin’ In My Lane.” The foregoing apart, in a recording/performing career approaching a quarter century long, **“Undone”** furnishes ample proof that Keen is a country songwriter of depth and substance.

Folkwax Score 7 out of 10.

Arthur Wood.

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