

A glimpse into *Bottom of the World*

The incredibly diverse and multi-talented Terry Allen offers thoughts on his first CD and vinyl release in several years
by Dana Jones, photos courtesy of jamesbland.com

"MY WORK COMES IN STAGES, MAYBE with music and drawings," Terry Allen says. It's a glimpse into the creative process of how this Texas icon approaches most of his works. Music is one of his many talents, and fans are excited about his latest endeavor.

Allen is about to tour Texas and release his first new CD in several years in conjunction with a new suite of prints he's done with Landfall Press, Inc. The incredibly diverse and multi-talented Allen is warm, welcoming and friendly. Much like each project of Allen's that evolves, I didn't really know what to expect speaking with him. Like each new project he creates, it was a pleasant and interesting experience.

Allen is one of those artistic souls that spent a lot of his growing up years in Lubbock, Texas. He's not just a singer/songwriter. He's been published, and there's been a multitude of musical and theatrical performances. He's done sculpting, painting, drawing, video, and installations using any and all of those media. Allen's works of art have been exhibited both nationally and internationally. He's won numerous awards and garnered acclaim for virtually every aspect of his artistic senses. Yet, he's managed to maintain his essence of remaining a down-to-earth sort of fellow. It may be in part due to his longtime companion and lovely wife, whom he speaks rather fondly of.

He and wife Jo Harvey Allen recently celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary in Europe. She is a multifaceted artist as well and is probably best known for both her film roles and one-woman plays. The Allens partner in many projects, often in theater pieces and radio shows. They actually met at the age of 11, attending the same Junior High school in Lubbock. They were good friends in high school, but really didn't start going together until their senior year. Marriage, children, grandchildren, and still they are together. She'll be found alongside him during his upcoming Texas tour.

Allen began writing songs in high school, with the explosion of Rock and Roll. "We did a lot of playing instead of just writing, it was anything to make others wiggle to the music."

He spent a semester at Texas Tech, then headed for Art School in Los Angeles. It was there he was in the Blackwall Blues Quintet. "I wrote some, but the band did mostly covers. In the '60s I got really serious and was always making words, music and pictures. They were all the same necessity."

works relate to one another even better than I thought I did.

Bottom of the World, Allen's first CD in several years, debuts January 22 and Allen will bring it to Dallas on January 26 for his live performance at the Kessler Theater. It will go nationwide in February, and the limited edition vinyl version will release in March.

For this project, he brought in fellow Lubbockites Lloyd Maines and fiddler Richard Bowden, along with son Bukka Allen, cellist Brian Standefer, and even his daughter-in-law to sing back-up vocals.

The concert will include Allen with his son, Bowden, and Standefer. His plans to feature the new album in the first set. "There are 11 songs on the new one. Several are older songs, "Old

Juarez," "4 Corners," "Dug Out" and "Ghost Ship." The rest of the songs are new. This will be the first album since 1975's *Juarez* that doesn't have heavy bass or percussion. "It's more music with sparse, open space," Allen said.

In 2011, he released an album from recordings done May 1, 1971. He was playing at the opening of an art installation in a hotel belonging to friend Allen Ruppertsberg. The tapes had been lost, then 40 years later they were found in a closet in New York and graciously sent back to the rightful owners. They were analog baked, digitized and then made into *Live at Al's Grand Hotel* in a limited edition Vinyl. The album includes photographs of both the performance and the installation, as well as five previously un-released songs. It's a unique treasure from the earlier years of Allen's career, and is only available for purchase online.

Allen liked and still likes the sound of music on vinyl, and decided to do it again with his latest fare. He was under con-



He will perform January 22 at the Kessler: Terry Allen

tract with Sugar Hill for several years, so this one is the first done all on his own in a very long time. "I feel like I've come full circle. It feels great, and it's really absurd not to do it this way."

Allen says his CD's are fine to

listen to a song here or there, or to play one for radio play. But for him, each project is actually made as one continuous thing, to be sitting and listening to from start to finish. He explained how he approaches new projects.

"I'm starting a project now, and I'm not really sure whether it will be art or theater or music, or a combination." When asked what music he listens to, he sur-

prised me with his answer. "Soundtracks. I'm listening to soundtracks from *Collateral*, *Grizzly Man*...are you familiar with that movie? (I was.) And the Tarantino Collection and some African percussion." I had ex-

pected maybe fellow singer songwriters or classical or some such answer. Certainly not soundtracks.

He went on to explain that he starts listening to a certain type of music and really gets into it. He might listen exclusively for a while to something like Mexican music. He loves listening to music, no types are off limits. Maybe it's his open mind that lends to such creativity.

"Tarantino likes to sit down, go through all his music, and then he makes the continuity of a soundtrack.

Certain images and sounds point the direction of the project." Having Allen discuss Tarantino was not anything I'd expected we'd discuss, but it made complete sense.

Allen's approach to his work seems to be much the same. I enjoyed our conversation immensely. And while we await the result of the project he's currently absorbed in, we'll have the new *Bottom of the World* CD and a January concert to savor for a while. ■

AMERICANA/BLUES

On a quest to discover who influenced his influences

Big Gus & Swampadelic's first CD, *Parlangua*, was released in September

by Mary Jane Farmer

WHEN ONE SITS DOWN TO TALK WITH Big Gus, one better be prepared to listen in a hurry; that's the way he talks. Big Gus, or as his mother named him, Gus Samuelson, has so much musical background, history, and influences that have affected his musical lifestyle, it seems they all have to spill out at once when he starts talking, or when he starts writing a song.

Samuelson, the songwriter of the group Swampadelic, talked about all the influences that gather inside his head when he starts writing a song. Those influences date back to his boyhood in Louisiana. His mother, a single parent who is still his biggest fan, hired an African American woman to help her. "She lived in with us," Samuelson said. "The music she played while working — that's what we had on the radio. I didn't think much about it, it was just what it was. I will never forget "Patches" and, he paused here for a deep breath, "that soul part that came in."

Then, his mother moved the family to Dallas where he started high school. "And there was Freddie King, Cookie McGee and Wanda King, and I went to school with these people's kids."

After school, Big Gus got into bull riding and joined the rodeo circuit. Joining the wranglers in the bars after rodeos, he was introduced to Tony Douglas and to a man who has become a radio personality peer while remaining a hero, Allan Peck. He became good friends with Gary Nicholson, who played guitar in

a band with Samuelson.

He was given Jimi Hendrix and Allman Brothers albums, and "that blew everything out of the water. Now, here's the kid from Louisiana raised on Memphis music, then going to school with Freddie King's kids, then shifting from R&B to blues and then into country."

Next, Samuelson was working lights at Dallas discos when someone said something like, "You know Merle Haggard, don't you?" And three or four sentences into that conversation, Samuelson found himself being The Hag's band manager.

He went on the road with Haggard and Bonnie Owens and five-string fiddler Tiny Moore and the other boys in the band. "I learned how they could be veterans of the road and still be normal people." Fender guitars gave the prototype Stratocaster to one of the boys in that band, "and I took care of that guitar like it's the Holy Grail."

All those years, Big Gus was formulating his styles (note the plural use of the word). He played bass for a western swing band on Saturdays and said, "There were

monster musicians there, too, and I was in the middle of it all."

Then he realized, after reading a magazine article on Duane Allman, that to grow as a musician, he needed to learn who influenced his influences. So he studied, learning that Robert Johnson influenced Duane Allman, and "I had to find out who Robert Johnson was."

"When somebody asks me, 'When you write a song, with so many styles music to chose from, how do you decide where to go with it?' He explains he has a matrix in his head. On the right side are big bands leaders — T-Bone Walker, Bob Wills. On the left, there are heroes of expressionism, the Tom Waits. "It's a rat's nest of music. And I try to



He also hosts Lone Star Underground on KHYI: "Big" Gus Samuelson

explain that and people look at me like I'm a nut."

Pen in hand, these songwriters or their influences come to him, and the songs just come out the way they come out.

"I make a point to remember and respect all the gifts given to

me as far back as it goes."

When it comes to respecting the musicians, Samuelson, whose calls his night-time KHYI radio show "Long Star Underground," points out that it isn't the mega-hit artists who can be called the "fibers that keep country music together. Not the ones at the top of the charts. It's the Tony Douglasses, the Curtis Potters, David Houstons. Artists like that, you have to keep them alive. They started it all." And those, in all genres, are the ones who get spun on "Lone Star Underground."

"That's where the passion of the music is, and for some reason, I've been able to retain it and translate it into songs."

Samuelson continued, "I can write anything and that's why I have a trombone and a fiddle in the band. It's a musicians' band and I leave the door open to any kind of music that walks through it. It's more of a sound." What can be heard when one listens to the band, he said, is "what's in my brain. All my influences in

my life are so powerful, they have all stayed with me."

At Swampadelic's core is songwriter Samuelson on lead guitar, vocals, and the occasional zydeco washboard; Ric Denker on fiddle (lately the 5-string); Bill Sallee on stand-up bass; Chad

A. Ford on drums; and Greg Waits on trombone. Sometimes Chris Schlotzhauer joins the band on his steel guitar and Chris Boren could show up with his trumpet. Often, there are more people sitting in to play or sing, or to record something with the group.

Swampadelic's first CD, *Parlangua*, was released in September. The CD itself is among *Texas Music Scene's* Best Albums of 2012 and a song on it made *Dallas Observer's* Top Country Songs. Already Samuelson has most of the songs ready for the second CD, one a stone-cold country and another a new Americana/blues song.

He doesn't work from formula, but believes there are some basic elements that make a good song. "You don't want anything longer than three minutes, and in that first 15 seconds, you better throw that hook in there, give it to them.

"The bottom line is a good song is a good song. It doesn't make any difference how it's played, whether it goes soul or jazz or blues or country, if it's a good song, people will like it.

"Those guys (the committee inside Big Gus' head when he writes) did all the work. I respect what they gave me and want to keep that alive. I have such respect, too, for the history of music, whether it be country or blues or jazz or whatever. I'm grateful that I have the freedom to do what I want to," said Samuelson, the song warrior. ■