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## Texas Songwriters prove they're best in the business

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The great guitarist Gordon Andrus once said, "If it takes electricity to play it, it ain't music." If that's true, Sunday's final concert in the Red Butte Gardens Series qualified in every way.

Promoted as an evening with Texas Songwriters, the all-acoustic triple bill featured the legendary

### Concert review

Townes van Zandt with his friend of 20 years, Guy Clark, and the relative newcomer Robert Earl Keen Jr.

After hearing the raspy-voiced van Zandt and Clark together, it's easy to see why the emphasis is always placed on the songwriter, not singer or even guitar player. However, songwriting is what they do as well as anyone in the business.

The three Texans write and sing refreshingly about all that's country-western — horses, cowboys, cheating, boozing and trains — and they do it successfully without falling back on the puns and clichés the genre seems to thrive on.

The highly underrated Keen began the concert by saying it was his first stop in Salt Lake City. But if he got the hint from the 2,000 people sprawled on the lawns, it won't be his last. Keen had to fight to keep from stealing the show later when the three played their too-short final set.

Keen began his solo set with "This Old Porch," a long, rambling story-song about his college days at Texas A&M and paying the rent working on his landlord's ranch. The next song, he said in a deep twang, was written about the only thing held over from his ill-fated rodeo days — "Copenhagen." "You know, that tobacco that looks like warm dirt. It's a nasty habit."

Keen joked that his rodeo career lasted about 15 seconds. "That's five bulls at three seconds each. Riding a bull is like driving your truck down the freeway at about 80 miles an hour and then throwing the steering wheel out the window."

A superior picker and storyteller, Keen threw everything in together for his last number, "The Road Goes On Forever," a long, sad romance song about Sonny and Sharon, "a girl that had been around." The chain-smoking Sharon "had a fresh one

hanging from her lips and a beer between her legs" the night she met Sonny, he sang. Sonny wound up going to the electric chair for selling dope "and Sharon just [went] on in her new Mercedes Benz."

Van Zandt showed quickly in his set why he's one of the greatest songwriters alive. He has penned some of country music's greatest hits, but always for better voices like Emmylou Harris and Willie Nelson.

Van Zandt opened with "If I Needed You," a terrific love ballad that few in the audience would have been able to sing along with before Don Williams made it popular. He also sang "Pancho and Lefty," another of his own songs that took someone else to make popular. Van Zandt said he wrote the song in Dallas one day where 500,000 people had come to hear Billy Graham and 200,000 had come to see a guru, "and 10 winos had followed me up from Houston."

The artist also introduced a new song named "Marie," about a homeless woman caught up in the bureaucracy of survival. "Marie didn't even wake up this morning, she didn't even try," the song concludes. "She just

rolled over and went to heaven."

Clark is the elder statesman of the trio and has been named an inspiration not only by his companions on stage, but by nearly every up-and-coming neo-traditionalist country singer alive. His "L.A. Freeway," "Homegrown Tomatoes" and "Desperados Waiting For a Train" have become standards on every alternative radio station in the country. Clark finished with a song about being "cowboyed all to hell," with Larry Mahan and Ramblin' Jack Elliott.

The three songwriters finished the concert together until it was too dark to see. To say they played loosely would be flattery. The three laughed and picked away, mostly independent of each other, on "My Home's Across the Blue Ridge Mountains" and van Zandt's "Turnstile Junkpile." And once nearly everyone had headed for home, the trio returned for a wild and rough encore version of "Who Do You Love."

For fans who pay more attention to what a song says than what it sounds like, Sunday was the perfect picnic. The only thing missing was Jerry Jeff Walker, but you can't have every-