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Robert Earl Keen on the Endurance of ‘Merry Christmas From the Family’

At Keen’s holiday concert at the Ryman, you can bet your last box of tampons that the holiday spirit will consume you

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Robert Earl Keen’s twisted Texas anthem of holiday cheer, “Merry Christmas From the Family,” reminds listeners that the holidays are about spending time with family. In Keen’s case, family is a motley crew prone to getting drunk on Champagne punch, smoking Salem Lights and eating bean dip while singing “Silent Night” and making runs to the local Stop ’N Go for essentials like tampons, celery and fake snow.

When Keen unfolded the dysfunctionally fun song on his 1994 album *Gringo Honeymoon*, the native Texan had no idea that the tune, which he says is “based in reality,” would morph into his holiday calling card. The song, along with his frequent concert finale “The Road Goes on Forever,” is among his best-known work. While “Merry Christmas From the Family” teems with poetic imagery, it will never be mistaken for Robert Frost’s “Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening.” But in some ways, the song is rooted in the aforementioned poem, which Frost once called his “best bid for remembrance.”

More than 23 years after writing “Merry Christmas From the Family,” Keen, now 61, is relaxing in his dressing room at the Tivoli Theatre in Chattanooga on a Monday afternoon. He’s four days removed from his Thanksgiving dinner and four hours away from kicking off the first concert on his annual holiday tour, dubbed the Fam-O-Lee Back to the Country Jamboree. The Lone Star State luminary flashes a quick smile and then flashes back to a time in the early 1960s when he first realized he had a talent for crafting entertaining prose. That’s when the subject of Frost comes up.

“I remember when I was in second grade, I rhymed the word ‘set’ with ‘silhouette’ in some little poem,” says Keen. “And I remember not knowing what ‘silhouette’ was. I just thought, ‘Oh, this works perfectly.’ My parents were not musical. However, my mom loved country music, and she was quite a reader and a student. So she was the one who would give me all the positive feedback. And I showed my mom my poem and she goes, ‘How do you know what that word is?’ I didn’t know. I just said, ‘Well, it works in this poem.’ So my mom fed me different literature — books and poems. There were things like Robert Frost’s ‘Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening.’ I still know that one today because she gave me a quarter for learning it.”

Keen proves his mom’s quarter was well-earned, reciting the poem word for word, all the way to the final couplet: “And miles to go before I sleep / And miles to go before I sleep.”

Indeed, Keen has miles to go before he sleeps on this night. After Chattanooga, he’s off to Greenville, S.C. Now in its sixth year, the holiday tour got its start in Keen’s home state and stayed in that general vicinity until it branched out last year. This year marks the tour’s biggest iteration: After the monthlong trek, Keen and crew will have visited 19 cities, including New York, Atlanta, Dallas and Nashville, where he’ll play the Ryman Auditorium on Dec. 28.

To up the Yuletide ante during the 2017 tour, each of Keen's band's six members assumes the identity of a music icon while onstage — Dwight Yoakam, Tom Petty, Bob Dylan, James Taylor, Neil Young and Levon Helm are each represented — and plays a song from that performer's catalog. Between singing his own concert standards like "Corpus Christi Bay," "Feelin' Good Again," "The Front Porch Song" and "The Road Goes on Forever," Keen plays ringmaster, giving each impersonated star a jocular introduction. He then steps toward the backdrop, which is decked out with oversized props featured in the lyrics of "Merry Christmas From the Family."

"If you aren't in the holiday spirit when you walk into the venue, I promise you will be when you leave," says Keen before our sit-down ends.

For many years, Keen would not play "Merry Christmas From the Family" between Easter and Labor Day. But fans began to demand it year-round, and the Texas troubadour eventually reversed his policy and began including it midset. Of course, this is his Christmas tour, so Keen saves his calling card for the encore.

Sure enough, the crowd at Chattanooga's Tivoli Theatre reaches a fever pitch of festive hysteria when he begins singing the first line of the song: "Mom got drunk and Dad got drunk / At our Christmas party."

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