

Slaid Cleaves

The music of Austin, Texas, based singer/songwriter Slaid Cleaves is rooted in traditional country and folk forms, but is distinct enough to have held interest amidst the sea of singer/songwriters from the 1990s into the 2010s. While he released a handful of recordings during the early '90s, he gained significant notice with *No Angel Knows*, which was released on Rounder's Philo subsidiary in 1997. Joined by former Lucinda Williams guitarist and producer Gurf Morlix, Cleaves combined his interest in folk songs, early rock and roll, and traditional country music into an amalgamation of styles becoming known at that time as Americana. Not surprisingly, the album rode high into the charts at Americana-formatted radio stations across the U.S. and Canada that year and set the tone for the rest of his career.

In his hometown of South Berwick, Maine, Cleaves began playing keyboards in garage bands while still in high school. His first band, founded in 1981 by childhood friend Rod Piccott, was dubbed The Magic Rats. After the lead singer was kicked out of his next band, The Classifieds, Cleaves started singing behind his Hammond Porta-B in local road houses, hotel lounges and bowling alleys. After reading in *Rolling Stone* about Bruce Springsteen's inspirations for the *Nebraska* album, he climbed into his parents' attic to rediscover the treasure trove of albums which he recalled hearing as a child – Hank Williams, Johnny Cash, Pete Seger - and which became guides to the budding songwriter. While in college, where he studied English and philosophy, he began learning guitar and spent a school year in Ireland, where he joined the league of buskers on the streets of Cork.

After a few post-college years in Portland, Maine, fronting the alt-country band, The Moxie Men, Cleaves and future wife and business partner Karen set out on a career adventure, moving to Austin in late 1992. Despite the echelon of acclaimed singer/songwriters like Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Lucinda Williams, Robert Earl Keen, Butch Hancock, and Joe Ely all centered around the Austin scene at the time, Cleaves was eventually able to make a name for himself there. In 1996, he began his collaboration with Morlix, who liked Cleaves' demo tape and ended up serving as producer for four albums, starting with 1997's *No Angel Knows* on Rounder Records.

During the following decade Cleaves began touring relentlessly, while releasing three more acclaimed albums starting with the career-defining *Broke Down* in 2000, followed by *Wishbones* (2004) and a collection of covers of friends' songs, *Unsung* (2006). After signing with Jimmy LaFave's Music Road Records, he issued *Everything You Love Will Be Taken Away* (2009, featuring liner notes from fan Stephen King), the two-disc *Sorrow & Smoke: Live at the Horseshoe Lounge* (2011), and *Still Fighting the War* (2013). The title song of the latter album was inspired by Craig F. Walker's Pulitzer-winning photo-essay regarding a soldier's harrowing return to civilian life.

2017's *Ghost on the Car Radio*, on his own Candy House Media label, found Cleaves exploring the traditions of small town American life. In a preview Joseph Hudak of *Rolling Stone* calls Cleaves “a master storyteller, one influenced not by the shine of pop-culture but by the dirt of real life.”

by Richard Skelly, Rovi - updated by Candy House Media