

**SLAID CLEAVES**  
*Everything You Love Will be Taken Away*

At seven lines and a tight 19 words, the definitive Slaid Cleaves bio — written with humble but poetic economy by the artist himself — neatly sums up everything you *really* need to know about the man:

*Slaid Cleaves. Grew up in Maine. Lives in Texas. Writes songs. Makes Records. Travels around. Tries to be good.*

Granted, there's a whole lot of story and details that can be shoehorned in there to pad and flesh it out. But until "writes," "makes," "travels" and "tries" are all made past-tense and one final line is tacked on for an epitaph — hopefully something along the lines of, "Died full" — all that's really called for, from time to time, is a footnote or two to bring folks up to speed on his latest batch of literate, sepia-toned Americana songcraft. This year's bounty comes baring the admittedly foreboding title of *Everything You Love Will be Taken Away*, but fans of the Austin-based singer-songwriter needn't fear: Everything you love about the man's singular voice and music is still very much . There's been some notable changes made, all in the name of artistic growth, but rest assured: all that living, writing songs, making records, traveling around and trying to be good has, par for his course, made Slaid Cleaves even better.

*Everything You Love* . . . is the followup to 2006's *Unsung*, a lovingly crafted collection of covers written by some of Cleaves' favorite — if somewhat lesser known — fellow travelers on the troubadour road. But it's been a good five years since Cleaves' last album of self-penned songs, 2004's acclaimed *Wishbones*, which fans had waited nearly as long for in the afterglow of the songwriter's 2000 breakthrough, *Broke Down*. But though Cleaves may never be confused with the infamously prolific Ryan Adams, his slow-and-steady-wins-the-race pace, not unlike that of Guy Clark, yields albums full of uncommonly fine-tuned songs built to stand the test of time. To the long list of past road-and-radio-proven Cleaves classics ("No Angel Knows," "Horseshoe Lounge," "Broke Down," "One Good Year," "New Year's Day," "Wishbones," "Drinking' Days," etc.), one can now add highlights from the new album like "Hard to Believe," "Beyond Love," "Temporary" and especially the opening "Cry," from which *Everything You Love*'s title was taken.

"I think of that song as sort of a breakthrough," Cleaves says of "Cry," which from the very first listen jumps out as not only one of the most emotionally trenchant songs of his career, but also arguably one of his catchiest. "showcases a shift in focus that I've taken with this record. It's a bit more internal, personal. I actually recorded that song four separate times, because from the start it like something new and special, and I wasn't quite sure how to present it. I always felt like this e could go the way if I did it right. I thought it had the bones of a thoroughbred."

"Cry" may be the centerpiece of *Everything You Love Will be Taken Away*, but it is not the only "not typical" Slaid moment here. Although character studies like "Black T Shirt"

and “Tumbleweed Stew” showcase Cleaves as the portrait-painting writer fans know best, by and large, everything else about the album — from the songs to the cover art to the title itself — represents a conscious effort to break the mold.

“I’ve been putting out records for 12, 15 years now, so most of the people who listen to this kind of music know who I am,” Cleaves says. “So I was very concerned with the possibility of inducing yawns if I were to just put out the same kind of record. And to reflect the different feel of this record I felt it needed to be presented differently. That’s how I chose the title; originally it was going to be *Hard to Believe*, which sounds like a ‘typical’ Slaid Cleaves record. I commissioned an illustration for the cover because I didn’t want yet another black and white picture of my face — I wanted some color and creativity and emotion there.”

Colorful though it may be, the cover painting — by songwriter/artist Dan Blakeslee [a fellow native of Cleaves’ hometown of South Berwick, Maine] — is steeped in sorrow, depicting a mournful man laying in a graveyard beneath an indigo, starry sky. Inside are liner notes penned by another Maine local, celebrity Cleaves fan and master of the macabre Stephen King. Clearly, this is not, as Cleaves joked at a recent show, “the feel good album of the year.”

“There’s definitely a grim aspect to it,” admits Cleaves with a chuckle. “The title of the record is from ‘Cry,’ but that phrase pretty much applies to every song on the album. Whether it’s your loved ones, your way of life, or even just your sense of innocence and hope, every song in some way is about how it all gets taken away. The last song, ‘Temporary,’ is my take on the age-old theme that death is the one thing that can make you appreciate how precious life is, how fragile it is.” Fittingly, some of the lines in that song were lifted right off tombstones in the cemetery near Cleaves’ house in Austin; he became fascinated with them when he took up jogging two years ago.

But “Temporary” was only partially born in a boneyard; the melody actually came to Cleaves in a dream. So did the one for “Beyond Love.” “That actually happens maybe 10 times a year,” Cleaves says, “but the bittersweet part is, nine times out of 10, as I’m coming out of sleep with these melodies I’ll be too groggy to even reach for my bedside recorder and find the right button, and by the time I fully wake up, I’ve lost it. So the ones I do catch are precious to me. Those two songs coming out of dreams that way was really the genesis of this record, because it signified a slight shift in my approach to writing. Instead of just looking for stories to tell, I switched to a more internal, emotional and mysterious form of lyrical songwriting. Once I got an inkling that I was going to be able to do that, I tried to use it throughout the record.”

Outside of his new angle on songwriting, Cleaves stuck mostly with the tried-and-true while making *Everything You Love . . .*, teaming again with co-writing buddies like Rod Picott, Adam Carroll and Michael O’Connor and recording the bulk of the album with famed roots-rock producer Gurf Morlix (Ray Wylie Hubbard, Lucinda Williams) in Austin. Additional tracks were cut with long-time road-guitarist Charles Arthur in Virginia, and Austin singer-songwriter and producer Billy

Harvey was called in help find that elusive, perfect take on “Cry.”

But as befits an album distinguished by his most personal songs to date, this marks Cleaves’ maiden voyage on the newly launched co-op label Music Road Records. The brainchild of fellow Austin songwriter Jimmy LaFave, noted engineer Fred Remmert and Kelcy Warren, Music Road will allow Cleaves the opportunity (and challenge) to be much more hands on in regards to the record’s promotion — and by extension, his career.

“What I like about the deal is that I’m in on all the decisions,” he says. “It feels good to have so much more control over my fate now. My CDs are like children to me; I want the very best for them, and I want to give them every opportunity to be heard. Their success or failure will have a huge impact on my life for years to come. I figured, I cut my own hair, I fix my own car — so why shouldn’t I be the one responsible for getting this work of mine out into the world?”

“In the co-op deal,” he continues, “I’ve got money invested now, as well as all the time and effort. And I stand to gain a lot more than I would with a ‘standard’ deal if the record does well. It’s a lot more work and will maybe mean even less time to write songs, but I’ll take the extra responsibility for a shot at the extra reward.”

Only time will tell how this new journey pans out; check back again in, oh, *hopefully* sometime before another five years have gone by. But in the meantime, there’s plenty of reward to savor right here and now in the digital grooves of *Everything You Love Will be Taken Away*. Hold onto it for dear life, and savor every minute of it.

Richard Skanse, Editor, Texas Music

## SONG BY SONG

### 1. “Cry” (Slaid Cleaves)

That sprang from a couplet in the first verse: “Every man is a myth/every woman a dream.” I found those lines in my journal and had no recollection of writing them, but I couldn’t believe I’d forgotten them. As soon as I had most of the song together, I knew there was something special and deeply emotional about it.

### 2. “Hard to Believe” (Adam Carroll/Slaid Cleaves)

Adam Carroll came over to my house with some ideas for a song called “Old Town Rock n Roll.” He had a verse and a half, and we banged out two or three more, but neither of us was happy with it. But we both kept working on it, and he ended up ditching everything but the title of the song. I took the verses that we rejected, reworked them some, slapped a new tag line and title on it, and I got a whole new song, too. So out of one failed song, each of us got a good song.

### 3. “Beyond Love” (Slaid Cleaves/Rod Picott)

That’s a very stylized melody that I probably would have never come up with unless I was dreaming. Lyrically, it’s another very internal song; I was just poking at that tooth, that little bit of sadness that comes as you get older, when the flame of romance starts to dim a little bit. But the beautiful part is, it changes into something even more valuable. I wrote it with my buddy Rod Picott, who I wrote “Broke Down” with and a bunch of other songs.

### 4. “Green Mountains and Me” (Slaid Cleaves/David Farnsworth)

Dave Farnsworth is a guy I’ve known since my Maine open-mic days. He sent that song to me a couple of years ago in its original form, and I thought it had the potential to be really great. So I approached him and said, “Hey, I’ve got some ideas for this song; would you be willing to bang it back and forth a bit?” I wouldn’t do that with anybody else but an old friend, but I was thrilled with that song when we were through. I think it’s gorgeous.

### 5. “Run Jolee Run” (Ray Bonneville)

I originally considered that song for my *Unsung* covers record project in ’06, but I was trying too hard to sing it just like Ray Bonneville, and it just wasn’t coming across right. He’s such a blues man, and I’m *not* a blues man. So I put it aside for awhile, but it was still one of my favorite songs. Later I sent my buddy Rod an early version of this record, and he said, “It needs something *sexy*.” And I thought that “Run Jolee Run,” even though the subject matter isn’t sexy, had that kind of groove to it. And I thought, if there’s some way that I can make that work honestly in the context of who I am, it just might work. So I kept at it, and I finally figured it out.

### 6. “Dreams” (Slaid Cleaves/Rod Picott)

Rod and I used to sit down in a room and try to write together, like Jerry and George did on *Seinfeld* when they were writing their pilot about nothing. These days, we just kind of

share a fragment or an idea and then go off on our own and mess with it. Rod had about half of those lyrics, and I took them to my hotel room and — boom — this melody popped out. Six months after I recorded it, I ended up going back to change some lyrics in the chorus at the last minute. It originally sounded ... well, a little too rainbows and flowers. Before we fixed it, we called it the “Kermit the Frog Song.”

**7. “Black T Shirt”** (Slaid Cleaves/Rod Picott)

Rod and I went to grade school through high school together, and we lived in this little blue collar town with some rough characters that we were enthralled with and afraid of at the same time. They were dangerous cats that we tried not to get beat up by, but we were always fascinated by those guys, and we’ve written quite a few songs about them over the years.

**8. “Tumbleweed Stew”** (Slaid Cleaves/Ron Coy/Michael O’Connor)

That’s a wacky little number that was started by my old friend, Wranglin’ Ron. He’s one of those bigger-than-life Texas characters — a bull in a China closet with a huge heart but a way of sometimes bumping people the wrong way. He used to call me up and leave funny messages on my cell phone, and I kept a log of them and some of his lines started ending up in my songs. So he suggested that couplet, “Where can a good man go crazy/where can a cowboy get stoned?” I went off on one of my little writing trips where I had two or three days to stare at those words, and I started concocting a little story about this character who just wants to have a little fun without getting into trouble.

**9. “Twistin’”** (Slaid Cleaves/Eric Blakely)

My friend Eric Blakely suggested the idea for that song after reading a story about a town in East Texas that had a hanging tree which people would flock to on hanging day, bringing the kids and selling lemonade and stuff. It’s a pretty gruesome part of our past that I was trying to catch in that song. I actually recorded a different version for *Wishbones*, but it didn’t fit for some reason. But I tweaked it over the years and decided it would fit the theme of this record just fine.

**10. “Beautiful Thing”** (Slaid Cleaves)

I’ve always been obsessed with political issues, and especially with the frustration and the cynicism that goes hand in hand with anything political today. But the last thing I wanted to do was pick up the flag from one side and preach to the converted. My goal was to design the song so it wouldn’t become obsolete. I like what Stephen King said about it being “reluctantly optimistic.” Maybe it comes from growing up listening to Springsteen, but I’ve always been intrigued by the idea that people keep at it, keep trying, despite every cloud of cynicism, regret and disappointment.

**11. “Temporary”** (Slaid Cleaves)

That’s another one of the dream songs on this record. I woke up with that melody in a hotel room, and remember stumbling to the laptop to get it down. That song kind of wraps up the mood of the whole record, which started with me looking at the new year in ’07 and thinking, “Man, I’ve really got it good now; there’s nothing left but just losing it all!” I really think it’s important to know that everything you have is temporary, so you

have to enjoy it now.