

## Protest Songs - Keb' Mo' On Immigration, Donald Trump, and Glastonbury

Written by Charles Waring

Wednesday, 26 June 2019 08:32 - Last Updated Wednesday, 26 June 2019 19:52

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Though he comes across as a softly-spoken man who laughs a lot, is self-effacing, and knows the value of humility, there's a core of inner steel that gives folk-blues troubadour **Keb' Mo'** a toughness that seems at odds with the gentle demeanour he projects. He's a strong believer in fighting for just causes and during a career that began in 1994 and which to date has yielded seventeen albums, Mo' has tackled many different and difficult social, political and environmental issues. Though he's been described as a protest singer, the 67-year-old Californian - who now lives in Nashville - doesn't express himself using cheap or catchy slogans; nor does he adopt a blinkered, dogmatic approach to his subject matter - rather, he convinces us his cause's worthiness by dint of his common-sense-reasoning combined with simple eloquence and the gentle art of persuasion.

On his latest album, '**Oklahoma**,' the quadruple-Grammy-winning singer/songwriter focuses upon two hot topics that are igniting debate all over the world - immigration and plastic pollution. But there are also heartfelt love songs ('Beautiful Music') as well as perspectives on feminism (the anthemic 'Put A Woman In Charge') and songs about persevering to overcome and heal personal troubles ('The Way I'). There are guest spots for the blues elder statesman

### **Taj Mahal**

, who appears on two cuts, as well as a telling cameo from lap steel guitar virtuoso,

### **Robert Randolph**

. They're joined by Mo's wife,

### **Robbie Brooks Moore**

, country music doyenne

### **Rosanne Cash**

, and award-winning Latin gospel singer

### **Jaci Velasquez**

.



Keb' Mo's previous album, 2017's '**Tajmo**,' was a Grammy-winning collaboration with the aforementioned Taj Mahal, but he hasn't released a studio album since 2014's

## 'BLUESAmericana.'

*"I know you'd like some flowery story about how we did it but it was just time to make a record,"* says Keb' Mo,' who follows this admission with a husky chuckle. He then elaborates:

*"I didn't have anything out for a while so I looked to see what songs I had around. I wrote two new songs that were 'Don't Throw It Away,' and 'Oklahoma' and the rest of it was what I had left in the banks.*

*I've had 'Beautiful Music'*

*(the last song on the album and a duet with his wife Robbie Brooks Moore)*

*since 'BLUESAmericana' and I wrote 'I Should've' not long after that. I started to put the album together. Then I got Colin Linden to help me with the production on it because I was kind of overwhelmed with tasks at the time (*

*Mo' is alluding to the death of his mother in September, last year, whom he dedicates the album to*

*). So I put a record together and that's what came out."*

But the new album is patently not a collection of leftovers. Rather, Mo had accumulated a cache of strong songs over the last few years that were looking for a home. *"I have writing sessions all the time,"* he reveals. *"I'd*

*go back and look through my files and think, 'I've got this right here, and that right there.' I'm always writing songs and when I write I try to make sure that I'm on point. When I sit down and have a writing session I've got to make sure that I'm coming up with something that's true and in the moment. It should come out and be an indicator of the time and what's going on with me and what's going on with the world as it relates to me. That way I have an honest record."*

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The album's centrepiece is the title song: a heartfelt tribute to the resilience and history of the people that dwell in America's so-called "Sooner State," which is enlivened by a countrified fiddle and a long, pithy solo from guitar maven, Robert Randolph. *"Although I had the hook line, the idea for the song didn't come totally from me,"*

*explains Mo'.*

*"On January 2nd last year I had a writing session with a songwriter called Dara Tucker, who I met the previous day at a New Year's Day party. She told me she was from Oklahoma, so I said okay, I've got this idea I've been working on. So we just started comparing notes about what we were going to do about 'Oklahoma' and looked up some more information. The record was centred around the history of Oklahoma - the good, bad, and the ugly: like the troubles - tornadoes - and the good things, like 'Black Wall Street.'"*

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Mo' is referring to the area around the streets of Greenwood, Archer and Pine in Tulsa, Oklahoma which was an affluent black community up until 1921 when it was destroyed in a "race riot" (coincidentally, the area also gave the GAP Band their name). Says Mo: *"I did a tribute to the people at that time of Greenwood, Archer and Pine, who built up a beautiful African-American community that was burnt down. I write in the song: 'Greenwood Archer and Pine, lives an elevated state of mind, keep on reaching for the sky, 'cause when they go low, we go high.' It's a celebration of that kind of optimism that lived particularly after slavery, in the 1860s. I wanted it to sound hopeful. I don't want to sound whiny or like that. I wanted to be a tribute and what happens is what happens and you can't go back and change it. I look at Oklahoma like I look at every state. Every place in the world has its challenges, has its things it's proud of, and its things that it's ashamed of, but in the end, everything is going to be all right. It's a bigger plan, it's a bigger thing, you know."*

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Despite focusing on some of the world's problems on his new album, 'Oklahoma' comes across as a very positive and life-affirming record. How hopeful is Keb' Mo' that humanity can successfully deal with some of the issues he addresses? *"I think we can but we're moving kind of slow,"* says the singer/songwriter. *"But I think our inability to address things quickly or to put our greed aside is hindering us. I think we can but I don't know if we will. We get a lot of things right but we also get a lot of things wrong."*



Of the album's most engaging songs is a ramshackle blues featuring Taj Mahal called **'Don't Throw It Away.'**

It has a light-hearted feel but offers a serious environmental message; lamenting the rise of plastic pollution which has now reached a critical level on a global scale.

*"With the first line, I go back to Leo Baekland, who invented plastics back in the late 1800s,"* says Mo'.

*"He was from Belgium. I sing Leo B had a big idea, Somethin' that would last for a million years.' I let him off the hook because he didn't know that he was going to invent something that would become a problem. He was just a scientist in his lab. The song's fun but it's not fun - I wanted to put out a message in a light-hearted way, so you could feel it a little more. I think it's easier as a way to take nasty medicine. My mum would always try to mix it up with something sweet. As they say, a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down."*

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On 'Don't Throw It Away,' 77-year-old **Taj Mahal** - 10 years Mo's senior - lends his considerable talents. Says Mo': *"He's an awesome figure in music. Whatever he puts his mark on, it's going to be better. He played the bass and did the answering vocal on there."*

Initially, when Keb' Mo' was beginning his career, Mahal was an inspirational idol he looked up to but as time passed they came to get acquainted and began to know one another.

*"Over the years gradually until the present day we got to become better and better friends and by the last record*

*(2017's 'TajMo')*

*" we had a great friendship and it was cool. Sometimes when you work with people you highly respect, it doesn't always come out positive, but this was so positive and so great. We went on tour - it was a really successful tour - we won a Grammy. It was a proud moment for both of us to win that together."*

While the effect of dumped plastic on wildlife and the environment is a news-making major talking point today, so too is immigration, the theme of Mo's song, **'This Is My Home,'** though it's a much more contentious topic: and one that has been seized upon by rabble-rousing right wing politicians to galvanise xenophobic hatred. The song intertwines three stories, as Mo' explains :

*"I just want to give immigrants, who we tend to demonise, a face, and a story that you can relate to. There are three characters; there's Lupe, Mohammed, and myself. Lupe is a girl who's sending money back home to her family, she's improving herself....she's going to school, she wants to start a family. Then there's Mohammed, who is a nice guy. He drives day and night in a taxi cab and he's just a kind, wonderful person. And then I talk about my own heritage. I remind people that I'm an immigrant by force - my ancestors were slaves - but nonetheless an immigrant. But I've got this great life and I'm telling you, apologetically, that you can't send me back to Africa - I ain't going!"*

Keb' Mo' laughs softly after uttering these words but it's a bittersweet kind of mirth tinged with a sense of irony. In defence of immigrants, he says: *"These are people who come to work. They get a job somewhere - maybe gardening or working in a factory or cleaning your home. They are very skilled workers, they're not just people coming over here to rape and murder, as Trump would say. I've come across immigrants living most of my life in Southern California and in Nashville where I live now and I've had a positive experience from immigrants, like Mexicans and Canadians. We always excuse the Canadians a bit, because it's just next door to America,*

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*but with Mexicans, it's like, 'we don't want them here.' It's just ridiculous how we decide who's guilty and who's not."*

Mo's perspective is at odds with that of his nation's president; the divisive, outspoken, billionaire, Donald J. Trump, who's aim is to build a wall separating Mexico from the USA. *"I apologise to the world for him,"*

Mo' tells me with a tinge of shame and embarrassment in his voice. Like many American liberals, he feels it is incumbent upon him to express regrets for his president's perceived wrongdoings.



In the USA, Keb' Mo' is an active campaigner. He belongs to the No Nukes Group and took part in the Vote For Change concerts in 2004 alongside Bonnie Raitt and Jackson Browne. He believes that expressing his opinions and voicing his concerns over political, social and environmental issues is as important as breathing to him. It's a natural thing to do. *"When you start addressing these issues, sometimes you get a finger pointed at you and some people will 'say stick to music - music should stay out of politics.' But I say politics is life. It is everything. And I write about life. Whether it's political, family-oriented or whatever it is, I'm going to talk about it. So if it happens to be political it's just life to me. It's not like I'm standing on a soapbox."*



Keb' Mo' was born Kevin Roosevelt Moore (he released an album called 'Rainmaker' under that name for Casablanca Records in 1980) but morphed into Keb' Mo' in 1994 when he released his self-titled first album, which established him as a rising star of the American blues and roots music scene. At 43, he was something of a late starter, but he's made up for lost time ever since, picking up four Grammys along the way. Blues wasn't his first port of call musically - he started out playing in calypso bands and then played with Jefferson Airplane violinist, Papa John Creach - but he was drawn to it because, he says, *"there was a deeper history there, and it was really simpler to get into: I fell in love with its language and simplicity."*

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