Various Artists
“Undone: A Musicfest Tribute to Robert Earl Keen”
Right Ave./Thirty Tigers

If all higher-education programs were as lively and illuminating as this one, university enrollment would mushroom. Texas State University’s Center for Texas Music History put on this salute last year in Colorado to one of the most literate in Texas’ long line of esteemed singer-songwriters, although Keen hasn’t been as widely recognized outside Americana music circles as some of his Lone Star State peers such as Lyle Lovett, Nanci Griffith and Steve Earle.

Nearly two dozen musicians, including Keen and his band at the end of the two-CD set, play more than two dozen of his songs here in a powerful testament to his considerable skills with pen and guitar. Among the participants: Reckless Kelly, Randy Rogers, Cory Morrow, Chris Knight, Kathleen Braun, Wade Bowen, Max Stalling and Doug Moreland.

When a heart breaks in one of Keen’s songs, every crack and shattered shard is felt, as Bowen demonstrates in his take on the exquisitely etched portrait of a man watching his former love return to town with someone new in “Lynnville Train.” Stalling evokes the sights, sounds and smells of a small-town dance that Keen painted so deftly in “No Kinda Dancer.” Keen can be as raucous as he is contemplative, and that’s where Moreland goes in his choice of the on-the-road-at-80 rave-up, “Daddy Had a Buleck.”

Keen saves what’s probably his best-known song, “The Road Goes On Forever,” to close out his five-song set, stretched out into a 12-minute celebration that, like so many of his songs, makes you wish it really could go on indefinitely.

— Randy Lewis