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[\(enlarge photo\)](#)

Slaid Cleaves, with his dog, Huddle, sits on the back porch of his house. The singer-songwriter, who moved to Austin from Maine in 1991, has a new CD, 'Everything You Love Will Be Taken Away,' which is built around the theme of loss.



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[\(enlarge photo\)](#)

'Temporary,' the last song on Slaid Cleaves' latest release, has lyrics that are culled from epitaphs carved on tombstones.



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Slaid Cleaves still has the 1974 Dodge Dart that he used to tour the country early in his music career. Although he was getting gigs in the late '90s, Cleaves had to supplement his income by taking jobs as a meter reader and as a pizza delivery driver.




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[\(enlarge photo\)](#)

Karen and Slaid Cleaves admit that they were a little naive about Austin before they moved here. "When I told somebody in Maine I was moving down here, he wrote down three names on a piece of paper: Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Butch Hancock and Guy Clark," says Slaid Cleaves.



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MUSIC

Engraved inspiration

Cemetery provides direction for Cleaves' new CD and for his life

By **Brad Buchholz**
AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

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Slaid Cleaves lives in a gray cottage at the edge of Oakwood Cemetery — and he's spent a lot of time, these past 10 years, walking through the elegant ruins of the graveyard. He's stirred by its silence, its secrets, its stories. He pauses before markers, jots down epitaphs from the headstones.

There's a granite obelisk near the south fence of the cemetery. Cleaves can see it from his backyard. At night, the obelisk catches the reflected light — from the skyscrapers, to the west, in downtown Austin — and glimmers, in the dark, like a candle.

"I see something new almost every time I come through here," says Cleaves, glancing at the headstones as he walks the rain-dampened cemetery paths in the late afternoon. The light is cool, the air sticky. "I have a list of my favorite names. Prosper Humbert. I like that name a lot. Doesn't he sound like a pioneer? Asher Smoot. He's from Kentucky. There's a woman named Ripsaw Red, I think. Tinsley Sintock. Olivia Manlove. It's one of the things I really love about Oakwood."

Slaid Cleaves, one of Austin's most gifted singer-songwriters, can't help but reflect on the temporary nature of things. How can it be otherwise, when the whisper of mortality is right outside the back door? Cleaves' fine new CD, "Everything You Love Will Be Taken Away," is built around the theme of death. The album tells stories of physical loss, for sure; but it's also about disintegration in the context of marriage, or love, or dreams. Or our own idealized notions of life.

Cleaves, 44, admits that death — cold, literal death — has been on his mind the past few years. Several of his ancestors died young, of heart disease. His parents are in declining health, and some of his siblings are fighting health issues. He worries his 14-year-old dog, Huddle, might not see another spring. When doctors warned Cleaves several years ago that his own blood pressure was too high, he began an exercise regimen of jogging in the cemetery.

"So here I am rebelling against mortality by running through a cemetery, noticing headstones, thinking about my own mortality, trying to be healthy," Cleaves says. "And it sort of kicked off a fascination with tombstones and epitaphs."

"Everything You Love Will Be Taken Away" — which features Cleaves' sweetest melodies and some rave liner notes by novelist Stephen King — is distinctive for the way it looks unflinchingly at what hurts. Cleaves opens the CD with "Cry," a song inspired by the death of his parents' marriage. He closes it with "Temporary," which features lyrics collected from graveyard epitaphs.

Yet in the end, Slaid Cleaves leaves you with more grace than gloom. There's a reassuring ring in that sweet tenor he sings. It reminds us we're not alone.

Leaving Maine









Richard Slaid Cleaves was raised in New Berwick, Maine, and though he's lived in Austin for almost two decades now, those blue-collar New England roots show in his disposition. He's a reserved man: practical, plain-spoken, earnest. A tinkerer, good with his hands. Just what you might expect from a guy who studied English and philosophy at Tufts University and came of age playing weeknight gigs at waterfront fishermen's bars in Maine.

Slaid Cleaves' wife, Karen, met her husband at one of those bars — Angie's — 20 years ago. "It was right there by the docks ... a rough place," she says. "Fights between fishermen were pretty common." Today, Slaid and Karen live in a house that feels like Maine: Wood-burning stove in the living room, kettles in the kitchen, stacks of freshly cut cemetery firewood in the yard, a feeling of warmth all around.

"I've always been more of a collector than a writer," says Cleaves, sitting on the porch swing in front of his house, reflecting on his artistic journey, as a soft spring rain begins to fall. "I'm more a documentarian. Even before I was writing, I was drawing pictures in grade school. And I would draw pictures of other things. I would look at things, study them and then re-create, as opposed to drawing pictures out of thin air. I was a copier, more than a creative force."

As a teenager, Cleaves adored Bruce Springsteen. But as much as the Boss' dark-tinged, blue collar anthems from "The River" roused him, the kid songwriter knew he was too introverted, too quietly thoughtful, to be a rock 'n' roller. Then Springsteen's stripped down "Nebraska" album came out. The starkness of "State Trooper" dazzled him. He remembers thinking: "Oh. I can do this."

Slaid and Karen Cleaves left Maine to seek their musical fortune in 1991 — and their exodus felt just like a Springsteen song. The day after Thanksgiving dinner with the family, they peeled out of

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Portland in Slaid's 1974 Dodge Dart Sport and took the thunder road to Texas. They were flat broke and, by their own admission, a little naive about Austin.

Karen was enchanted with the prospect of temperate winters. Slaid knew about Joe Ely and "Austin City Limits," and that was about it. "I didn't even know about Lucinda Williams," Slaid says. "When I told somebody in Maine I was moving down here, he wrote down three names on a piece of paper: Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Butch Hancock and Guy Clark. I started doing my homework once I got here."

Cleaves played the Kerrville Folk Festival in '92, won the New Folk competition there. He made a big impression on songwriter Ray Wylie Hubbard, who became a mentor. Still, it took Slaid Cleaves a long time — eight years — to find his niche, to reach a widely respected tier of the Austin songwriting community.

In the meantime, Karen took bar jobs to pay the bills. Slaid did what he could, and his struggles have become part of Austin singer-songwriter lore. He toured the country for more than a decade in that beat-up, broke-down Dodge Dart. He took odd jobs as a pizza delivery man, a meter reader and a groundskeeper. He earned money intermittently as a pharmaceutical test subject for Pharmaco — taking medications for menopause, diabetes, bed-wetting, irregular heartbeat, dermatitis. In the name of science. For the sake of the rent.

By the late 1990s, Cleaves was clearly frustrated as a musician, shaken by "six, seven, eight years of failure." Music, he recalls, "was looking like a pathetic hobby and not a career. I was getting deeper in debt every year. I was dependant on my wife and her job, borrowing money from family and friends to make records. I thought to myself: 'These songs of mine have to be not only a little better, but an order of magnitude better.'"

Slaid Cleaves looked hard, within himself, at the things that hurt — and elevated his career and his craft through a renewed commitment to self-examination. One wouldn't figure it would be hard for him. His father had worked as a psychologist; his mother was a teacher. In any case: Cleaves embraced a "heightened" form of self-criticism. He set the bar higher. He began co-writing with friends, rather than take on the responsibility alone. He reviewed why music was important to him — and how that related to his own craft.

"I eventually learned — or decided — that my job was not to tell people how I felt, but to tell them how they felt," says Cleaves, whose career blossomed in 2000 with the release of "Broke Down" and hit a new plateau with "Wishbones" in 2004. "So I started to craft stories to elicit a certain response. How are people going to remember me? I need to affect them. I need to make them cry, to pierce their heart. The songs have to be piercing, and they have to be brutal. That's what I went for."

Slaid Cleaves cares deeply about craft — and you see it most vividly in his posture. He's a thin, healthy, handsome guy. Piercing blue eyes. Dashes of silver in his jet black beard. Yet when he talks about songwriting, Cleaves lets his voice grow soft. He'll bend into himself, hold fast to his shoulder, or his leg, as he talks about the power of song.

"I know I'm doing music because music pierced me, affected me, changed my life," he says, sitting on a piano bench inside his house, the songbooks of the Beatles and Tom Waits behind him. "Music, to me, is how I made sense of the world as a teenager. It's how I made sense of myself. It affected me on a visceral level. So when I knew I needed to step things up a level, I said, 'I needed to create the effect in other people that music created in me.'"

Borrowed words

In warm shadows of a spring afternoon, Slaid Cleaves walks among the broken grandeur of Oakwood Cemetery and points out a few of the markers that touch him the most. The ruined ones have a strong effect on him: "so beautifully crafted, yet so ravaged by time." He talks about Maine cemeteries he knew as a boy, how the Oakwood headstones are bolder, blockier, more masculine than those of New England.

Cleaves the writer is very at home in this place. Every marker, every epitaph is a story to him. Even the grandest monuments collapse in on themselves in time, ambivalent to our own visions of forever. Cleaves' album is all about that. The song "Temporary" — which came to him in a dream, composed largely from epitaphs, collected from his research — is all about that.

Live well and learn to die
Soon in the dust you'll lie
with everything you know

"I'm a little embarrassed," Cleaves says. "People talk about how beautiful the language is in that song. But it's not my language. Again: That's me being a documentarian." He explains he collected epitaphs from Oakwood — and then began seeking out other epitaphs, older epitaphs, from the 17th and 18th centuries.

Yet the idea: To look directly at the hard, haunting reality of our mortality and then frame loss in a gentle, poetic way, is all Slaid Cleaves. And it is born of courage of hearing a haunting melody in a dream — seeing the word "Temporary" flashing in the dream — and honoring the call to express the eternal story that belongs to all of us.

"Through the living and the writing, I feel I've grown beyond the fear, or an obsession with the idea of death. I've made my peace with it," he says. "But it's been helpful to accept that the time is coming. One of the lessons of the tombstones – 'live well and learn to die' – is to be ready at all times."

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Fêteing 'Everything'

Slaid Cleaves plays a second night celebrating the release of 'Everything You Love Will Be Taken Away' at the Cactus Cafe tonight. \$17 at door. 8:30 p.m. 24th and Guadalupe streets on the University of Texas campus. 475-6515; www.utexas.edu/student/txunion/ae/cactus.