

BY SUE ZALOKAR
STAFF WRITER

Shakey Graves was born one evening around a campfire with friends. But he sprang to life when his creator, Alejandro Rose Garcia, an Americana musician from Austin, Texas, tried the name on for size at an open mic. It fit.

As Juliet says in Shakespeare's classic tragedy: "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet." For Rose Garcia, this might just be the case.

Rose Garcia has been working toward his recently achieved fame for more than a decade. With a recurring part in NBC's "Friday Night Lights" and appearances in four of Robert Rodriguez's films, it looked like Rose Garcia might follow an acting path.

In fact, it was his one-man show as Shakey Graves playing guitar and a suitcase drum kit that would become his life's work. He busked outside Mumford and Sons

(and lots of other) shows. He also used the then burgeoning platform of Bandcamp to get his music out there, connect with fans directly and build the Graves, Rose Garcia legacy.

Today, Rose Garcia's dreams are becoming reality with hard work, hard play and occasional unproductive mornings spent reading comic book compendiums and talking to arts reporters.

Shakey Graves recently won the Emerging Artist of the Year award at the 2015 Americana music awards. He and Esme Patterson performed their hit "Dearly Departed" at the awards show. He will play a Halloween show in Portland at the Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall on Saturday, Oct. 31.

Sue Zalokar: How did you get your handle, Shakey Graves?

Alejandro Rose Garcia: I read this interview about Jeff Buckley one time. It was after "Grace" came out. It was a huge success, and his concerts started to get really huge and he missed the intimacy of smaller venues. So at one point he did a solo ghost coffee shop thing where he played in a bunch of small venues, maybe even open mics and stuff, and he just changed his name every night.

So a slew of people saw Jeff Buckley play and maybe didn't even know that they were watching Jeff Buckley. That really stood out to me as the music really speaks for itself. It doesn't really matter what your name is. You can play someone a song and it blows their minds. That's it. That's all that matters.

I was camping with friends at a music festival. We were sitting around drinking beers, and a guy came up to the campsite – he was probably tripping on acid – and we had a 20-minute conversation with him that was completely nonsensical.

His parting wisdom was "Watch out for spooky wagons." We all agreed that would be a really good country guitar picker name – Spooky Wagons. But Waggins, not Wagons.

We all made up names that begin with an S and end with an S and found it kind of silly, but also kind of cool. There was Spooky Waggins,

Spencer Jones, Solomon Doors – I was Shakey Graves.

S.Z.: Gum culture is big in Texas from what I understand.

A.R.G.: Oh yeah. We love guns (Rose Garcia says in a thick Southern accent).

S.Z.: Where do you stand on the topic of guns?

A.R.G.: Oh. I don't really think about guns. I mean I do in the sense that – I'm flabbergasted by the whole thing. I've seen how Australia does it. That seemed to work great: Essentially, pile up your guns and fuck it.

I know a lot of people who own guns, and I love guns. They are fun to shoot at inanimate objects. I don't really have the stomach for hunting or anything.

I think it is insane how easy it is to buy a gun. If I wanted to, right now, or even at 2 a.m., I could walk into a Walmart and buy a semiautomatic rifle. That's insane.

(In August, Walmart announced it was ending sales of many of its semiautomatic rifles because of low sales.)

Guns aren't a joke. At all. It's common sense.

S.Z.: I've lived in rural areas, and most recently, with the tragic shooting at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, a group of people has come forward – rural people who consider themselves to be responsible gun owners and hunters – and want to remove themselves from being lumped in with all gun owners.

A.R.G.: This is where I feel like the whole conversation is misguided. I don't think it really has anything to do with guns.

The question isn't where did he get the gun. It's why did he shoot a bunch of people?

That might be a wide swipe at it, but a gun is a tool as much as anything is a tool, as much as religion is a weapon in certain people's arms.

We could go on forever. I want the cops to shoot this guy, but not that one. Or should we have nukes? Should we abolish war? Where do we draw the line?

I have certain spiritual and psychological beliefs that at times are tied together. Mental health isn't always plain old mental health.

S.Z.: I'll bite. What do you mean?

A.R.G.: My father is deep in ayahuasca culture in Peru. He studies a bunch of that stuff. The belief in shaman world in South America is that many physical ailments are ailments of the mind or the spirit. And that by curing one, the body adheres to the mind. Spiritual illness is a real thing.

I'm not a Christian, or any denominational person whatsoever, but I do believe in the soul. Some part of me has trouble not believing in extradimensional shit that could go on.

Perception is so narrow. I can see the garbage in my house. And I can hear the sounds outside of my door, but there is so much more going on – on a molecular level.

There is magic happening all of the time that we can't see. It's not out of my pantheon of belief. Some South American cultures – and more what we would perceive as rudimentary or uneducated people – they still give a little space for some vague version of possession: things

A Rose by any other name ...

For Alejandro Rose Garcia – or Shakey Graves, as he is known on stage – dreams are becoming reality



Shakey Graves won the Emerging Artist of the Year award at the 2015 Americana music awards.

COURTESY PHOTO BY ELIZABETH GRIFFIN

getting into your body. That is traditionally why they call liquor, spirits, because it weakens your spirit and allows other things to get into you.

S.Z.: From my perspective, as a more than liberal Pacific Northwesterner, if you are going to land in Texas, it best be Austin. Portland can be a springing board for many musicians, but it can also notoriously be a musical rut. How does Austin compare?

A.R.G.: It's such a national platform these days that a lot of good bands get lost in the cracks. There is a rich lineage of people coming from here. It's sort of a pilgrimage spot for folks.

It's a wonderful town. I go back and forth with living here or leaving here. All of my issues are that I'm from here so I know it's not a place for me to "hermit."

S.Z.: You have worked with director Robert Rodriguez. What was that like?

A.R.G.: Robert is awesome. He has been doing his thing in Austin for a minute, and I've been lucky enough to work with him, I think, four or five times now.

Austin is a tight-knit community. I took acting very seriously for a long time. That was what I did. At a certain point, he's as big as it gets here in town. Amazing stuff comes through, but in a constant way. He makes all of his films here in his studio.

The first time I worked with him was when I was still in high school. It's all just bit-player stuff. It's nothing to write home about, but (I was) trying to build a résumé.

I think most people think success happens overnight. A lot of people are like, look at your meteoric rise to success – suddenly there is all of this stuff happening for you. It must be mind-blowing. And I'm like, having your career unfold over nine years is not mind-blowing. It is absolutely logical. This is where I saw myself 10 years ago.

S.Z.: That's kinda cool. It speaks to the power of visualizing your future.

A.R.G.: It really does. I use this symbol: It's a skull with an arrow through it with a little heart on the end. I devised that in the fall of 2004. I didn't even have my name yet. Let alone any music. And I was like, this is the symbol and when I sign stuff, I will always sign it with this symbol on it, and that way you know it's from me and not anyone else. And then I'm like, who am I talking to? Who cares if my signature is going to be forged on this music I haven't even made yet? What am I talking about? But lo and behold that same symbol is tattooed on people's bodies. It's astounding.

S.Z.: You have referred to yourself as a disciple of Townes Van Zandt. How has he influenced your work?

A.R.G.: Yes, but I found a corner of songwriting that I wanted before I even came across (his music). I made a song one time and sent it to my friend – 'cause that's what I used to do with my songs – and he was like, "Dude, this sounds like Townes Van Zandt."

I didn't know who that was, and so I went and looked him up and I kind of freaked out. I

started crying. It felt like someone had written all of the songs that I was planning on writing – like it had already been done. It was some weird scene in a sci-fi movie where you find your life's work already done for you. Townes had already died (when I found him), which made it even weirder.

All that to find out that I was probably around him when I was a kid, at a certain point. I grew up in town (Austin), and he spent a lot of time around here. It was very surreal.

And then he became one of my rotating patron saints of music.

S.Z.: How would you describe what you do?

A.R.G.: I'm continuing a tradition of old songwriters with new influences. If I'm alone in my house, I'll write an acoustic song, but now that I have access to (money) and studio equipment, I have a guitar and enough money to buy this amp setup that I've wanted my whole life. And you're going to give me a stage to run around on? Watch out. This is a whole side of my dream which is really coming true.

S.Z.: You played Pickathon. You visit Portland pretty frequently. Do you have a connection to Portland?

A.R.G.: Pickathon is the shit. I played a show in Portland four, five years ago, and the Pickathon folks found me on the Internet. They tracked me down and invited me to Pickathon.

I've been going to Portland since I was a little kid. I've always liked it. Portland has always been loosely referred to as a sister city to Austin. It's got similar people in a way.

S.Z.: You're playing a Halloween show. What can people expect?

A.R.G.: Lots of off-color "Star Trek" jokes.

S.Z.: I might have to grab tickets to check that out.

A.R.G.: Are you a "Star Trek" fan?

S.Z.: I am, somewhat. My boyfriend even more. He works for Dark Horse Comics.

A.R.G.: What? I just spent the morning being not productive and reading comic books. I just finished the third compendium of "The Walking Dead" comics. Have you read those yet?

S.Z.: I have not. They are on our bookshelf, though.

A.R.G.: I'm going to preface this by saying I don't really care about zombies that much – certainly not the TV show. I don't watch that, at all. But the comic book is so good, I can't believe it. So good. So they have been releasing these compendiums that are like 1,000-page books. They look like "Grapes of Wrath," but it's a huge comic book.

S.Z.: How do you read it? I tried to read Neil Gaiman's "The Sandman" compendium, and it was huge and awkward to hold. I couldn't settle into it. Do you have a secret?

A.R.G.: Nope. You just have to look like a dork, slam it on a table and manhandle it.