



SANJOY Narayan

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# One MAN Show

He has a solo career but plays with other musicians too. His music is a happy blend of different styles. Keller Williams is a remarkable man



**MUSIC WITHOUT BORDERS**  
Keller Williams' music is a blend of many styles and genres

C. TAYLOR CROTHERS

**I** WONDER HOW many people remember Leon Russell. An American singer, songwriter, pianist and guitarist, Russell with his trademark straight long hair was best known as a session musician, sitting in with the likes of, well, almost every major rock musician of the 1960s and the '70s on both sides of the pond. Russell has played with musicians including Jerry Lee Lewis, George Harrison, Ringo Starr, Eric Clapton, The Rolling Stones, Dave Mason and even Frank Sinatra. Most famously, Russell organised long-time collaborator Joe Cocker's Mad Dogs and Englishmen tour in 1969. Russell himself had a solo career that began in his teens when he started singing the blues and gospel music.

If you've watched Concert for Bangladesh, organised by George Harrison and Ravi Shankar in 1971, you may remember the fantastic medley of *Jumpin' Jack Flash* and *Young Blood* that Russell played scorchingly on keyboards. But I'm not going to go on and on about Leon Russell. Yet there are many young musicians of today who are known for their penchant to work on several other projects with different musicians, besides having their own solo careers or bands. One such is a remarkable singer and guitarist named Keller Williams.

In his late thirties, Williams is an American from Virginia whose music is a blend of many styles and genres – you'll find hints of folk, bluegrass and reggae happily co-existing with electronic, jazz and funk. But more important is the manner in which he plays. His own shows are typically one-man affairs where he takes the stage usually with just a 10-string custom-made acoustic guitar. But that's deceptive. His guitar is connected to something called an Echoplex Delay System that lets him record his riffs and repeat them, improvising as he goes along. In effect, when he plays alone, he can use these sound loops to accompany him as if he was playing with a full band.

Another quirky aspect of Williams's music is the names that he gives his albums. His 13 albums (till date) all have one-word names: *Freek* (1994), *Buzz* (1996), *Breathe* (1999), *Loop* (2001), *Laugh* (2002), *Dance* (2003), *Home* (2003), going up to, more recently, *Grass* (2006), *Dream* (2007), *12* (2007) and *Rex* (2008), the last one a live performance at the Fillmore released only as a digital download.

His solo career apart, Keller Williams has played regularly with members of the String Cheese Incident, a Colorado-based band that fuses a lot of bluegrass and rock with psychedelic influences, a bit of jazz and a whole lot of improvisation. Besides, he's eager and willing to jam with a host of others on the American music festival circuit.

But the project of his that I really enjoy is *Keller's Cellar*, a weekly hour-long podcast in which he digs deep into his enormous collection of music and presents songs by a host of musicians drawn from different genres – many new musicians but also quite a few old, rediscovered geniuses. For me, Williams's podcast, which is also streamed on the Internet on web radio channels as *Keller Williams's Somewhat Ruleless Radio*, is a weekly exploration into a world of familiar, unfamiliar and, very often, completely unexpected sounds. Last week he treated me to a buffet of top-notch stuff. He dug up a track by Karminsky Experience Inc. They are an ultra lounge London band with roots in the Soho club scene and their music, although very unique, is very danceable. I checked their Myspace page where among their influences, they count Alessandro Alessandroni, the Italian multi-instrumentalist now in his eighties, the late Peggy Lee, Bobby Gentry, Henry Mancini, many others and... Usha Uthup!

Although like most good DJs, Williams doesn't yak too much on his shows, being an accomplished musician as well as having a wry sense of humour, he does do zany things, like scatting along with some songs and, on occasion, breaking into a tune himself. He doesn't shy away from taking playful jibes at other musicians either. A good weekly fix if you're looking at discovering new music or just having a great DJ choose the music for your evening or even to liven up that dreary morning drive.

Last week, *Keller's Cellar* also had Mofro, a Florida-based folksy, bluesy band who are very angry about the destruction of their state's ecosystem by indiscriminate real estate developers. And Ani DiFranco, the controversial indie rock queen who has her own label called Righteous Babe. I also got to hear, for the first time, Utah Phillips, an American folk singer and storyteller with pronounced left leanings who died at 73 this May. Williams had also thrown in some Charlie Hunter, guitarist and co-founder of the exceptional Garage-a-Trois, a great jazz-fusion band, as well as some uncannily rare Herbie Hancock.

Keller Williams's taste in music is a bit like the music he plays – he draws from a wide variety of influences. All the way from jazz and folk music to hip-hop, electronic and dance. He speaks a little bit after every three songs he plays but otherwise leaves you alone with the music, which is always unexpected. But one thing's for sure; on *Keller's Cellar* you're unlikely to get music that you've heard on the radio before. Check it out.

(To stream or download the music mentioned in this column, go to [www.hindustantimes.com](http://www.hindustantimes.com). And send feedback to [downloadctrl@gmail.com](mailto:downloadctrl@gmail.com))



**A NEW SOUND**  
Keller Williams's podcast, *Keller's Cellar*, featured indie rock queen Ani DiFranco

**I REALLY ENJOY KELLER'S CELLAR, A WEEKLY PODCAST IN WHICH WILLIAMS DIGS DEEP INTO HIS ENORMOUS COLLECTION OF MUSIC**