

A Blessing and a Curse

Kevin Gordon was supposed to be a poet, and he wound up playing rock 'n' roll. His music isn't a career choice, it's a life.

ONE DAY AROUND 1980 SHERDIE

Major came home from a trip that hadn't been all that unusual to find his mother's yard dazzled by freshly painted tin panels that he had meant for a garden shed. Thus did Mary T. Smith, then seventy-six years old and an otherwise ordinary resident of Hazelhurst, Mississippi, finally and publicly announce the artist within.

"I did it to brighten the place up and please the Lord," she said to the scholars who came after.

It was all a bit of a surprise, and then a hint of fame. Mary T. Smith continued with her bright and pleasing work, more than filling her yard, then many houses where she might not otherwise have been welcome. She kept on painting even after a stroke in 1985. Her health, combined with the indifferent education available to a poor black girl in the 1920s, made the inscriptions that announced each painting more difficult to decipher. Despite or even because of that, she came to be acclaimed as an important folk artist, widely collected within that small world.

Rusted from its long service in Smith's cluttered yard, one of those early paintings brightens the Nashville home Kevin Gordon shares with his wife, two small children, and a bunch of words grinding around in his head. The painting reads, I AM HERE A LONG TIME, OH, MAN, THE LORD IS GOOD.

It is a benediction, and a curse, and a reminder.

No reason at all why she started, just something she had to do. And once begun, almost impossible to stop. "That kind of directness, that intuitive expression is what I'm drawn to,"



Gordon says, "and hopefully is what I'm doing musically."

He has made of himself a songwriter and a singer and a poet, a part-time collector of folk art, and a father. The difficulty, naturally, comes in ordering those things. And in reconciling their inherent disorder.

No. The problem is that he can't stop. Won't. Shouldn't.

Not because Keith Richards and some friends who used to play with Elvis cut one of his songs, "Deuce and a Quarter," on their album *All the Kings*

Men (checks still dribble in from that, but the decimal point has never been far enough over to impress anybody). Not because Lucinda Williams sang a gorgeous duet with him to open his last record, *Down to the Well*. Not because his own work compares favorably with those more famous names.

Because it's what he's meant to do.

"I've had these talks with my relatives in the last year," he says, "because they're concerned about our well-being—and rightly so. I understand where they're coming from. But I've

really had to sit down and say, 'You don't understand. This is not a career choice. This is a life. This is what I do.'"

The blessing and the curse. Few are directly called to any single pursuit, and so they drift through life and a series of jobs, burdened by no clear vocation. It is both simpler and infinitely more difficult to recognize that there is really only one thing you are meant to do, and that the consequences of that certainty place you hopelessly adrift from the world of health insurance, retirement plans, and parental expectations.

Gordon has released three albums since he lost the songwriting deal that finally emboldened him to move to Nashville in 1992. Another blessing and a curse, that deal. He found himself unable to lodge a chorus in Garth's mouth ("It was probably my worst creative year ever") and thoroughly committed to the rhythms of his own songs. They speak eloquently to the many complicated strands of his life, from his upbringing in North Louisiana to his graduate schooling at the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop, and to the ways he's made a living. Words worked hard and put down clearly, guitars bursting in all the right moments, the roots of his raising and his education showing through both.

"I'm still trying to figure out how the two halves of my brain work together," he laughs, his measured words betraying neither Louisiana nor Iowa. "You know, why does this make sense? Does it make sense? Go to poetry school and study aesthetics all week and then jump in a van with some guys and go play some little farm-town bar in Iowa out in the country.

"Somehow those things, they're a great combination, because we were able to escape the compound for a little while and hang out with people who had dirt on their hands."

In some of the circles that orbit folk art and folk-derived musics, that dichotomy amounts to slumming. "My point all along has been that just because I read James Wright or Wallace Stevens doesn't mean I'm posing when I'm playing this 'simple' music," Gordon argues. "It just means that I don't fit a convenient paradigm, but who does?"



And yes, he was—and is—a serious poet, published in *The Denver Quarterly* and *Southern Poetry Review* and such. That training makes him as serious a songwriter, and clear about the distinctions. "Melody is the great informer," he says. "The songs that I write are helped by the fact that I wrote poetry for so long, if for no other reason than there's this obsession with words that sound good together."

But he still works a part-time job, and it's not certain there'll be enough money left over from a gig in Atlanta to pay for a hotel room, which means driving four hours home after. The gray in his hair's not going anywhere, nor are the bills.

"Rock 'n' roll's for people who pay rent," he puts it, managing a wry smile. "Suddenly you're the guy on the front porch yelling at the kid across the street to turn his stereo down, when you used to be the kid across the street with the loud stereo. Interesting territory."

"Once you look at your child for the first time, it dawns on you you're going to die. In metaphorical ways before literally. . . . But suddenly there are limits to your experience, if you play by the rules."

The rules say the middle years, into which Gordon is easing uneasily at thirty-seven, are a creatively fallow season. It is possible to rehabilitate and venerate the old, and there is usually something fresh and engaging to be found amid the energetic young. But middle age belongs to the mundane, to creative consolidation, not to artistic expansion. Certainly not to risk.

Except that there is now a generation of songwriters who will not go quietly from the good nights and bright lights. The challenge for them—Steve Earle, Lucinda Williams, Rodney Crowell, dozens of others—is to channel the discipline of less reckless lives into songs that are true and honest and to sacrifice none of the power of their youth. To make simple-seeming music convey more nuanced experiences without diminishing in power.

"I think it's this way for all creative people who still have the drive; the thing that says you can't *not* do it," Gordon says. "Because it's a part of you that you just can't kill, this thing that

defies all logic, all logical life planning. And it's like the more you do it, you're defying everybody who's ever said *no*."

Then there's the matter of finding the time to write when there are two children under five demanding (and deserv-ing) your attention. "It's been a rough couple of years," he admits. "But great. I mean, everybody's healthy, thank ye gods for that. But it's certainly changed things. I can't sit around and stare at the wall for half a day like I used to. And I think that's probably a good thing. But pretty much whenever I get a chance to be in my house alone, I go get my guitar, because I know it's not going to last."

IN SOME WAYS MARY T. SMITH HAD an easier go of it as an artist. She worked with found materials and required no collaborators. Music is a particularly capital-intensive art to pursue, what with studio time and guitar strings, hired drummers and 4 a.m. gasoline. And at seventy-six her choices were less muddled.

In his own way, Gordon is as much an outsider to the Nashville music business as Smith was to the New York art world. "I liked being here because I was instantly disconnected from academics, thrown into this other nest of demons, the music business," Gordon says of his early days in Nashville. "It's kind of weird being here now, because most of what I do has nothing to do with what's going on across the way. I find cynical pleasure in the fact that my label is in New York. It just felt so good to make records and not have it depend on the local climate here."

Smith's paintings put an exotic coda to an otherwise undocumented life, while each of Gordon's songs is a carefully measured, artfully veiled slice of his present and past. An ongoing testament. "I have a real hard time making up stories, making up characters," he admits. "I've certainly written a lot about family members."

And so Kevin Gordon's ears remain open, and his eyes watch the world, and another record is slowly beginning to take shape. About a year ago he found a Staples Family album in a Des Moines thrift shop. The only turntable in his house was long ago supplanted by an

elementary school, one of those heavy tube artifacts that's hard on vinyl and virtually indestructible. *I Had a Dream* is an obscure enough title that it shows up on none of the discographies, but it's been spinning regularly on Kevin's turntable and in his memory.

"The sound of that record has really

drawn me in," he says. "And for some reason I've been listening to a lot of gospel lately. I don't know what it is: Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Sister Wynona Carr—she has a great song called 'Dagnet for Jesus.' It's something I've always been interested in. I don't know why, at this point.

"Seems like when my stepdad and my mom were in their early forties, which I'm not, they got really interested in religion. And it's not like I really feel the need to go to church, it's just to explore those myths from the inside out. And I'm sure that the folk art thing has affected that, too."

Those Odd Things with Melody



I'VE WRITTEN POETRY SINCE I WAS fifteen; songwriting started when I began playing guitar three years later. Both have been good ways to talk to the dead or to say things to the living that would be too difficult or dangerous at close range. And though both tend to start with journal entries, I keep the two pursuits separate—different forms, different animals.

I guess I get a little irritated when I hear "poet" or "poetry" being used as a kind of colloquial compliment for song-

writers: "Bob Dylan is the greatest poet ever, man!" I understand what's meant by that, and maybe I'm just splitting a semantic hair here, but to me, Dylan is a great songwriter, and that shouldn't mean anything less. Sure, I can read the lyrics to "Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands" and gaze in gee-whiz wonder at the text, but the words are only half of the form. It's like putting on the master tapes from *Blonde on Blonde* and dropping Dylan's vocal from the mix. He writes *songs*—those odd things

with melody bending his unforgettable lines around. And though there are things I've learned from poetry that are useful when revising song lyrics (like paying attention to rhythm), I've never been able to think of song lyrics apart from the sounds that inform them. Playful comparisons can be made between, say, Chuck Berry and Walt Whitman—both masters of that long American line:

I saw her from the corner when she
turned and doubled back
And started walkin' toward her
coffee-colored Cadillac.

—"Nadine,"

Chuck Berry, 1964

Berry's lines are so good—even if you've never heard his song—that you can't help but read them with the same rhythm he uses on the record.

A line in long array where they
wind betwixt green islands,
They take a serpentine course, their
arms flash in the sun—hark to the
musical clank.

—"Cavalry Crossing a Ford,"

Walt Whitman, 1865

Whitman's poem has those similar, sprawling lines with alliteration and assonance working throughout the pulsing phrases, but they are unrestrained by time signature or melody.

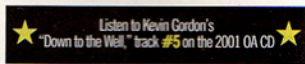
"DOWN TO THE WELL" IS THE TITLE track from my second and current release on Shanachie. Like most of the songs I've written, it's about real people

Such explorations are hard, exacting, largely solitary work. And because that work matters deeply, he will take it slowly. "I'm just starting to hear sounds," he says of his next album. "I've got this little group of songs that are no happier than the [last] ones. I keep saying to people when I'm playing that the

happy songs are going to be on the next album. But not yet.

"It's really hard to write about the good things, like my children. How do you do it without slipping into this saccharine sweetness, without saying something that's been said ten thousand times before? I used to wince when I put on

Guitar Town and [got to] Steve Earle's song, 'Little Rock & Roller.' I thought, Man, cheesy. Now that I have kids, well, he's coming from a real place there. Maybe that song's not so bad after all." ★



by Kevin Gordon

I've known—either from my childhood in Louisiana or from my travels since. The song took too long to finish: I'd had the first few lines and the melody for them for five years.

Mud-colored dogs guarding shotgun
shacks—a red door on a green
Cadillac
Hot wind blowing smoke through
graveyard streets
Face I recognize looking right through
me.

They'd come from my journal: images from a weekend on the road, driving through Arkansas and North Louisiana. I don't know why I kept them around for so long; I just played them over and over, while sitting around trying to write. It always felt like there was something good in there. The last half of that first verse came later, out of more journal stuff, from another trip back home, when, since I no longer had family there, I'd ended up in a thirty-dollar room out on Louisville Avenue in Shreveport, Louisiana, just me and a rattling window unit, toughing out the August heat. I was back home, but definitely not at home anymore. But I never got anything else that made much sense until the fall of 1999, when the pressure was on to get songs finished for the new record.

I wrote more verses, this time approaching from a different angle. For the longest time, I'd always thought the first verse (and the song it would eventually belong to) was about a particular place. Using those first lines, I'd even cowritten an entire song with Jeff Finlin called "Star City" (about the actual town

in Arkansas, or maybe about Nashville, we never decided which). But it never felt right. When coming back to my original fragment much later, I tried to think about the tone and emotion in those lines instead of worrying so much about where they happened. Two scenes came to mind: first, a musician friend's dark-night-of-the-soul at the Waterfront Club in Ottumwa, Iowa:

You played that dive twenty some-odd
years
With the faith and the whiskey, you
killed your fear.
I remember the night you broke down
to the core,
threw that black Stratocaster through a
plate-glass door.

The other, a still-recurring personal scenario of running into old girlfriends on the road:

See that woman in the corner, brother,
she knows
every inch of my body, every mile of
my soul
We used to shake 'em on down 'til the
blazing day
What's she doing here tonight
watching me that way?

Colin Linden, a friend from Canada, helped me edit those verses and come up with the chorus—they seem so reductive: Why does all of this have to be about just *one* thing? After trying something that was more abstract ("River Burning Down"), we batted around an old metaphor. "Ain't Goin' Down to the Well No Mo'" is the title of a Leadbelly

song. Leadbelly had shown up in an early version of the first verse, in the form of his own statue that stands on Texas Street in Shreveport. And working from an old metaphor like that seemed to be in line with what this song was about: embracing the familiar, then turning away from it; trying to see nostalgia for the glittery worthless thing that it is.

BO RAMSEY, MY COPRODUCER, AND

I first met Lucinda Williams about eight years ago—music-promoter friends in New Zealand had passed both my CD and Bo's to her while she was on tour there. The three of us met in Nashville and spent a couple of days hanging out together in my tiny apartment, drinking wine and spinning John Lee Hooker records. One night we sat in the kitchen and passed a guitar around. Lu sang some early versions of songs that ended up on the *Car Wheels* record, including what became "Drunken Angel," but when she let loose on a Hank Sr. song, it was all over—so much sadness in that voice, so loud and undeniable, right there at my own table. When she sang, it felt like that little room got even smaller, like I was pressed right up against whatever heartbreaking mess made her sound that way. I lost it: I bid all good-night, closed my bedroom door, put my head in a pillow, and cried like I'd just lost my best friend.

All along, I'd said that I only wanted Lu to be on the record if it made sense musically—I didn't want it to be about just having her name on there for the sake of marketing. Friends, I think it made sense. What you hear from her on the track is the second take. ★