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by ROY KASTEN

**M**IDNIGHT. September 10, 2005. Nashville, Tennessee. Joe McMahan, Kevin Gordon's guitarist, engineer and co-producer, stands back by the Station Inn bar and watches the John Cowan Band play to a packed room. "I don't know about this crowd," he says. "Maybe we should open with a gospel number." His girlfriend, singer-songwriter Jennifer Nicely, looks equally uneasy.

Cowan's newgrass set runs twenty minutes over. A burning banjo solo blurs into an even more burning fiddle solo into a yet more burning guitar solo. The musicianship is impeccable, blinding, and gratuitously brilliant. The band established they could play in the first 30 seconds, but jam after jam makes sure you haven't forgotten they could smoke just about every cat in Nashville.

The cutting contest ends, and as Kevin Gordon's four-piece rock 'n' roll band quickly sets up, the crowd thins out. Gordon very nearly didn't play a showcase at the Americana Music Association conference, so perhaps he should be thankful for any slot, however absurd. He probably is.

By the time he tears into "Watching The Sun Go Down", the opening song from *O Come Look At The Burning*, Gordon's first record in five years, the crowd is down to about a dozen, and the bar hands are ready to clean up. Gordon is drenched in sweat. He grips his Telecaster like a branch in a hurricane, shaking it or being shook by it — you can't say for sure. His drummer and bassist sink into a low, dirty groove at the bottom of an undrainable swamp. They get immersed in the song, and the song gets immersed in them.

"Hundred birds up on the high line," Gordon sings, with Nicely echoing his damp drawl. "Hundred birds up on the high line. All fly away at the same time. Watching the sun go down." It's the sound and feel of the blues, but McMahan will barely play a solo all night, or at least not the solos customary to a blues band. He stalks the stage lightly, rocking on the balls of his feet, focusing like he can hear whispers through the roar, the sustain of his notes hanging in the air like heat lightning.

After four numbers, the bar manager calls out: "Two more, guys!" "Two more beers?" McMahan replies, though he knows they're pulling the plug. Gordon shifts into a Willie Dixon cover from the new album, singing, "I'm a crazy mixed up kid and I love to dance like this." He is and there's no doubt he does.

Kevin Gordon was born in Shreveport, Louisiana, and grew

up in Monroe, a town of 53,000 along the I-20 corridor. He still has family around there, in Jackson and Crowville. He still plays Enoch's Pub in Monroe, where he first heard Boozoo Chavis and the tough juke-joint blues that defines his sound. And he still likes to soak up the stories of Ouachita Parish.

"Just sitting at the bar at 5 o'clock and listening to people talk and watching the local news," he says, "I enjoy hearing those voices and what they're talking about. I've written a lot of songs about people down there. It's an ongoing dialogue with self and with the past."

In high school, Gordon played in rock bands with bad names — the Innocent Victims and Fragment 36 — covering the Ramones and the Sex Pistols, trying to write songs like R.E.M. His father, who worked in data processing, encouraged him to pursue a practical career. So he spent three years at North

East Louisiana University in Monroe, floundering and failing at everything but his guitar playing — he was studying Eddie Cochran records — and his poetry.

A creative writing professor, Dev Hathaway, and a visiting poet, Jorie Graham, encouraged him to keep working at the poems and to apply to the University of Iowa MFA writing program. He was admitted in 1987 and found the loose structure ideal. "You learn as much in the bars as in the classrooms," he says. "And it was the first time I was allowed to declare myself as a poet. I would get up five days a week, work on my poems, read, go to class, then go to the bars and talk to my pals who were doing the same thing. It's a big ego circus too, as you'd imagine. But I felt I came away a lot smarter."

In Iowa City, Gordon frequented jam sessions, where he met kindred spirit Bo Ramsey (guitarist for Greg Brown and Lucinda Williams, among others). Eventually he joined Ramsey's band, crisscrossing the midwest, playing Little Walter and J.J. Cale songs, and drinking beer with farmers.

By the time he graduated from the program, Gordon had started up his own band — a cassette-only release from that period, *Carnival Time*, has recently been reissued on CD — and was supporting himself by gigging a couple nights a week. "Expenses were low," he recalls.

But was he a poet or a guitarist? A bard or a musician? Gordon knew he wasn't an academic. He merely sensed some need to write and play that never quite materialized as a career path. He thought he might just be good at it. Mostly he was just making up his life as he went along.

"I remember somebody had vandalized one of the hallways outside the workshop," he says. "It said: 'Don't be a writer. Just write.' Iowa City is one of the few places on earth where you

## BURNING LOVE FOR BLUES PEOPLE

*Kevin Gordon deals only in art...as a poet, songwriter, and collector-dealer in folk traditions.*

could say that and have it make sense.”

In the summer of 1992, he followed the somewhat inevitable path for a songwriter and headed to Nashville. “I missed being in the south,” he allows, “but I didn’t really know what to do. It was hilarious. I was walking around with a tweed jacket on. The response was favorable, but nobody knew what the fuck I was trying to do. And I didn’t understand the whole Nashville songwriting thing. I co-wrote some songs, but the experience was dreadful. I met some good people, but I wasn’t supposed to be doing that.”

With guitar and paper, he sat in an office at the publishing company Warner/Chappell, “in one of those little rooms where all those guys are trying to beat them out.” In 1993, he wrote a few songs with Marty Brown. “It was probably my worst creative year ever,” he says. “You’re under that pressure: ‘OK, here’s your check for this month, what have you turned in?’ We had put an offer in on a house on the day I got the news that my deal was over. I just sat on the stoop of the duplex where we were staying and poured bourbon.”

The creative wall he’d hit in Nashville broke when he met Gwil Owen, one of the many scrappy, smart songwriters who orbit the Nashville mainstream. Together they worked on four of the best

songs for what would become Gordon’s 1998 album *Cadillac Jack’s #1 Son*. “In one day we wrote ‘Dissatisfied’ and one more tune from the first record,” he remembers. “I realized it can work if you’re with someone who understands what you’re doing.”

E Street Band bassist Gary Tallent also seemed to understand. With Tallent hired to produce, Gordon cut *Cadillac Jack* — a loud, literate cycle of songs about his native Louisiana, rock ‘n’ roll thrills, and soul-killing disappointments — in Tallent’s Moon Dog studio in Nashville and then shopped it for a year.

“Nothing happened,” Gordon says.

But that’s not quite true. Along the way, his songs made it into the hands of Sonny Burgess, Scotty Moore, Keith Richards, Ronnie Hawkins, and Billy Bob Thornton (among others), all of whom recorded them. “It pretty much happened without my persuasive skills,” he says. “I’m not one of those people calling managers and shit and saying, ‘I have a great song for so-and-so.’”

*Cadillac Jack* finally found a home on Shanachie, a folk label with a solid track record. Gordon issued a follow-up, *Down To The Well*, in 1999. The album featured Lucinda Williams on the title track and production credits from Bo Ramsey and Gordon’s now steady guitarist McMahan.

says. “I had already gotten a second mortgage for expenses. I couldn’t be a mercenary touring artist like I had been. My kids were born in ‘97 and ‘98. I guess I pulled back some; I don’t know if that was the right thing to do or not.”

As he pulled back from the road, Gordon threw himself into the world of contemporary folk art. He began working in a local gallery and taking trips to visit the artists, hear their stories, and learn about their work. “I figured out if I was going to buy this stuff, I have to be able to afford to do it,” he says. “It was becoming an unhealthy obsession. That’s when I decided to start selling it. It’s not really connected to me and my self, but I believe in the work.”

His modest house in East Nashville barely has space to hold his collection (which can be viewed by appointment or at his website, [www.gordongallery.net](http://www.gordongallery.net)). Pieces by Jimmie Lee Sudduth, Willie Dawson, Chuckie Williams, David Butler, Howard Finster, and Curtis Young cover the walls or are stacked in corners. He points to one of his favorite paintings, by Mary T. Smith of Hazelhurst, Mississippi: totemic figures in coarse black raise their arms in praise or protest from a field of green.

“Along the side of the Highway 51, the main drag, in ‘75 or ‘77, she started making these signs and putting them in her

yard,” Gordon explains. “She painted figures on pieces of tin over acre-wide pieces of ground. Why did this happen? Why did she do it? It’s interesting to watch her progress. There’s an earnestness about it all that’s incredibly appealing to me. It raises questions about creative process, why people do what they do with what they have at hand.”

Gordon dedicated *O Come Look At The Burning* to these vernacular artists, though he hesitates to draw parallels between his work and theirs. “The art has changed the music and I can’t articulate how,” he says. “I went to school for poetry, so I have this trained language thing, but on guitar I’m essentially self-taught. There’s this odd ‘I don’t know what I’m doing but it feels good’ [sense], combined with being attracted to language, paying attention to language.”

The language of *O Come Look At The Burning* is dirty and beautiful blues; it’s rock ‘n’ roll made in the moment and outside of all concerns except what might leap from fingers and mouths and hearts given over to spontaneous performance. Gordon cut it live in McMahan’s rented house, a maze of vintage gear and tiny rooms, each with their own sonic character. The songs draw inspiration from schoolgirls headed home in the summer, an artist named Joe Light who finds God in prison, a roadside



Kevin Gordon.

*Down To The Well* was one of the finest albums of its decade — muscular when it rocked, aching when it slipped deep into the south, well-crafted but instantly alive.

Gordon toured that album hard, perhaps too hard. “I toured as much as I was able, but less than the label wanted,” he

wooden cross wrapped in flowers, a college roommate drunk on memories and a Janis Joplin album, and a bracelet made of guitar strings and diamonds.

The songs also return again and again to one individual’s attempt to find his way, to find a cure without compromise. On an Eddie Hinton cover, he finds it by way of “Something Heavy”; on “Make It Good”, he simply surrenders to the “shaking ‘tween the here and now.” That search, not just for meaning but for purpose, remains the one constant in Gordon’s life and art.

“I’m in an ongoing battle-slash-embrace with the higher power,” Gordon acknowledges. “For a while in college, my mom and stepdad were living in Crowleyville, southeast of Monroe. They were going to a country church. I was encouraged to go, and I would occasionally. It scared the shit out of me. People were falling out on the floor. It was overwhelming. These people are not acting. They really believe it’s happening. But along with that, I wondered: Why am I not feeling this way? Do I want this guy to touch me on the forehead? Will I fall over?”

“Songs happen like that. I’ll have this recurring memory. It’s like a movie. You find your way into it.”



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