



The Gourds

At the forefront of the alternative country music scene, the Austin quartet's influences range from Lynyrd Skynrd and Charlie Daniels to David Bowie and Doc Watson

The proliferation of product currently being marketed as "alternative country" smacks of little more than bandwagon jumping. Meanwhile, down in Austin, Texas a four-years-young quartet called The Gourds has chiseled out a niche of its own in this particular marketplace.

We're not talking about the execution of high precision country licks or drinkin' n' cheatin' lyrics, but a loosely cohesive mix constructed from many genres of music. Scratch a little at that four-years-young tag and you discover that 30 something head Gourd, Kevin Russell, has a pedigree stretching back to the early 80s.

His multi-genre approach to music is nothing new. During our transatlantic conversation, Russell recalled that one of his previous bands, The Picket Line Coyotes, had been described as "a cross between Husker Du and Hank Williams". Husker Du, a St. Paul, Minnesota based 80s trio, blended punk and pop rhythms with lyrics that leant towards introspection. There's really nothing to say about Hank ...

Kevin Russell was born in Beaumont, Texas, and lived there for 15 years before moving to Humble, Texas. "We moved to a really nice neighbourhood and I hated it. All these rich kids. That's when I started playing the guitar. I kind of stole my father's guitar. My

father, he played probably the most influential music I heard. He picked some guitar and sang country and folk music songs."

While in Humble, Kevin formed his first band. "There was one guy named David Harris who played drums and a little guitar. We had a band called Malice. It was a bit of an AC/DC rock band."

Southern bands such as Lynyrd Skynyrd and Charlie Daniels were a major influence on the budding musician and, once he began playing with other local musicians, he began writing songs.

Relocating to Shreveport, Louisiana at the age of 17, Kevin embarked on the next phase of his playing career. "I met a guy at a pizza place I worked at named David Green who played drums. We got a band together called The Picket Line Coyotes. Claude, the accordion player in The Gourds, his older brother Robert Bernard was in The Picket Line Coyotes. Our bass player was called Joey. We got our name, because around that part of the country there's a lot of ranchers who raise sheep, goats and cattle. They have problems with coyotes attacking and killing their stock. The ranchers kill the coyotes and hang them up on fence posts to scare off other coyotes."

Performing mostly in bars and clubs that form part of the Deep South chitlin' circuit, the band self-released a couple of recordings during the late 1980s. Their first, a vinyl-only release, was called

Fashion Dogs. The cassette-only *Upholstery Van Songs* followed.

The Coyotes subsequently relocated to Dallas, Texas. "We played around that scene for a while. Then our bass player quit and got a regular job, because he had kids. That's when Jimmy Smith joined The Coyotes. The material on both albums was all original. I was the only songwriter in the band."

Cut at Crystal Clear Sound in Dallas, the third and final Coyotes album, *We Shall Annex The Sudetenland*, was another cassette-only release. Although Jimmy Smith had joined the lineup by the time the album was recorded, he did not contribute any material. "Near the end of The Coyotes, I started encouraging Jimmy to write songs and sort of mentored him in that. By the time The Coyotes broke up around 1991 we had moved to Austin."

"As a kid growing up, my uncles always played me Jerry Jeff Walker and Willie Nelson records. They talked about Austin as if it was a magical place – which it is. The Coyotes came down here a few times and played shows. We liked it here and wondered why we were in Dallas and not in Austin."

For two years following the breakup of The Coyotes, Russell played open mikes, and cut sufficient material for two albums during this period with local doctor and musician, Ron Byrd. They were never released. Meanwhile, Smith was in Nacogdoches, East Texas. "He was out on his own, out of my shadow and away from everybody. That's when he really bloomed as a writer. He came back with this tape of songs that blew everybody away."

Upon his return to Austin, Smith and Russell formed The Crackles, along with Byrd and drummer Claude Bernard. "It was a short-lived prototype for The Gourds. The instrumentation was acoustic guitar, bass, drums and mandolin. The band eventually fell apart and I decided to quit the music business."

A year passed, and Russell felt inspired to play again. Concurrently, Jimmy and Claude had formed a duo called Old Government. Bernard began playing hooter, progressed to toy accordion, then a real accordion. "We found a drummer and decided to get a band together again."

The drummer was a Welshman named Charlie Llewellyn. "He was here in Austin playing with some friends of ours ... I told Jimmy to go check him out."

The Gourds made their debut at Another Cup Of Coffee in 1994, progressing to venues such as Hole In The Wall, Flipnotics and The Electric Lounge.

In early 1995, Llewellyn approached local music journalist Rob Patterson. At that time, Patterson was working with Mike Stewart on a compilation record called *Austin Country Nights*.

"Mike said he was interested in working with us. He suggested we set up an eight-track in his house and record some stuff. Mike was working with the Munich Records people over in Holland at the time, setting up Munich Records USA. He played them some stuff when they came over for South by Southwest in March of '96. They particularly liked our stuff."

The Gourds' debut album for Munich, *Dem's Good Beeble*, was recorded at Laurels Ranch in the West Texas Hill Country town of Comfort. "It's really beautiful out there. It's very relaxed. Lots of fresh air. The house itself is pretty well set up for recording, with real high ceilings and rock walls, salttillo tiles on the floor. It really has a lot of resonance. We didn't want to record in a studio because a lot of them are pretty antiseptic, clinical places."

In the twelve months following the release of *Dem's Good Beeble*, the band performed around 200 shows in the USA and Europe. The Gourds made their UK debut at London's Borderline in February, 1997, returning later the same year for a short tour with Radio Sweethearts.

At the 1997 MIDEM conference in the South of France, Mike Stewart, working on behalf of Sire Records, was approached by Heinz Geissler of Watermelon Records in Austin. Watermelon and Sire had recently negotiated a partnership deal, and the feeling was that The Gourds would be a beneficial addition to the Austin label's roster.

Stadium Blitzter, the band's sophomore effort, was released in

Europe by Munich Records in February, 1998, and entered the Watermelon catalogue in April. Russell and Smith almost equally shared the writing credits. Llewellyn left the band following the completion of the album and was replaced by Kevin Langford.

Touring in support of the release in May 1998, The Gourds played a string of European dates, and a couple of London gigs, at Brixton's Twisted AM Club and the Philosophy Club.

This past October, the band was once more ensconced in Laurels Ranch recording their third album, due for release early in 1999. Meanwhile, Watermelon has released a maxi-single titled *Gogitchyershinebox*. Three songs cut in Austin's Arlyn Studio are supported by a handful of live cuts captured by Holland's VPRO Radio during The Gourds' latest European sojourn. (The title derives from a comment made by a character in the movie, *Good Fellas*.)

The studio tracks include two covers, David Bowie's glam rock anthem, *Ziggy Stardust*, and the Snoop Dogg rap track, *Gin And Juice*. The Gourds' panorama of influences is further reinforced by the live portion of the set which includes *I'm Troubled*, learned from the Doc Watson album, *The Watson Family*.

Russell affirms, "I listen to a lot of old field recordings. That's one of my passions for sure. It just amazes me sometimes the things that have been recorded which few people know about. I've owned a lot of Alan Lomax recordings."

In the July 1998 issue of CMP, Douglas McPherson's live review of the band's Brixton show included the comment, "Apart from a pungent cover of Steve Earle's *Copperhead Road*, I didn't catch a single lyric as the steamy music battered my brain." While this may have been partly the fault of the venue's limited sound system, it has to be admitted that, even on record, the band's lyrics are at times impenetrable.

"Fats Domino said that you should always slur your words a little so they don't know exactly what you're saying. He never explained why. If that's the way Fats Domino does it, then it's all right to do it that way."

Recently, The Gourds assisted Doug Sahm on his latest album, *Get A Life*. "He is sort of a father figure in a way. It was suggested he record with The Gourds since we were fans of his. Doug liked the idea, so we went into the studio one day and banged out a couple of songs. We played live with him at a festival in San Francisco, which was great. And we've done the occasional show around Austin with him."

The Gourds have perfected a sound that appears loose and unstructured, almost to a point where it shouldn't work. But it does. Other scribes have pigeonholed their sound as a cross between Creedence Clearwater Revival, Gram Parsons and The Band.

Kevin Russell closed our chat with some reflections on the band's third recording. "It will hopefully come out in February. We'll decide on the title after it's done. I do have one song – it's called *The New Way Of Grieving And Smokin'*. I like that title." ■

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