

KEVIN DEVINE AND THE GODDAMN BAND

BETWEEN THE CONCRETE & CLOUDS

As Kevin Devine started work on his sixth solo album, *Between the Concrete & Clouds*, he decided to make some fundamental changes. The first notable difference was the way he structured his day when he woke up each morning. Having spent most of his time on the road during the last few years, he needed some adjustment when he was stationary, at home in Brooklyn.

"As odd as it is, there is a routine to your day as a touring musician, so it's always jarring when I come home from being on tour," he says. "So I started to go into our rehearsal space almost like someone going in to his office, from like 2 to 7 o'clock every day. I was coming up with melodies and multi-tracking ideas, and not worrying about lyrics right away."

And this marked the second big change for the New York City-born singer and songwriter. Rather than starting his process with a tight focus on the words, he allowed himself to follow "the things you unconsciously stumble upon—almost like the lyrics are a color more than a narrative." Not, of course, that it meant any less of a commitment to that element of his writing.

"I love words so much," he says, "that I think I've kind of overstuffed my songs sometimes, at the expense of melodic strength or concision. I tend to write songs that are complicated, in terms of the people in them and what they're going through. So the point this time was to make a record that still dealt with those themes, with what was happening in my head, but to do it in four-minute pop songs."

This focus on musicality and succinctness indicated yet another new direction for *Between the Concrete & Clouds*. "I grew up listening to Weezer and the Cars as much as to Nirvana and Bob Dylan," says Devine, "and on tour we were listening to a lot of Kinks and Zombies records." His recent touring partners Nada Surf helped him reconnect with the power-pop side of his personality, which came straight to the surface in the new batch of songs.

"The song 'The First Hit' totally came from Matthew Sweet, and 'The City Has Left You Alone' has that kind of 'Getting Better' bounce to it," he says. "Also, I learned to stop worrying about

'Does this sound too much like this?' This far into it, I think it all sounds enough like me—whatever that means—to not worry about those things."

For nine wildly productive years, since the 2002 release of *Circle Gets the Square*, Kevin Devine has been tireless and fearless in exploring the possibilities for his music. It seemed his moment had come when Capitol Records released *Put Your Ghost to Rest* in 2006—but the following year, he was dropped during the label's merger with Virgin Records. Seizing this as an opportunity, Devine committed to building his growing fan base through constant touring, and the results were the most successful and widely acclaimed music of his career with *Brother's Blood* and *Bad Books*, a side project with Andy Hull and other members of Manchester Orchestra.

His work on stage and in collaboration with other musicians emerged instantly when he began the actual recording of *Between the Concrete & Clouds*. "The first time we got into the studio and played 'Off-Screen,' and the chorus kicked in, I knew this was different, and awesome," he says. "The guitars felt jangly and Peter Buck-y, and the chorus leapt up and knocked me on my ass. The band played it the way I imagined it, without me having to say 'I think it should go like this'—and that's the way 90 percent of the sessions went."

The resultant recordings reveal Devine's twin pursuits of experimentation and accessibility. The title song had actually already been released as a 7-inch single. "It was this plaintive, acoustic thing," he says, "and then we thought that it should sound like it's on *In Utero*, and opened it out to this gnarly guitar solo and shrieking feedback, but kept the vocal performance where it's not screaming your lungs out."

The songs may not wend and expand like the seven-minute journeys on *Brother's Blood*, but that doesn't mean that Devine has lost any of his lyric ambition. "The song 'Awake In the Dirt' is about the daughter in Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*," he says. "I see a lot in that character about how one person's radicalism is another person's terrorism, one person's American dream is another's imperial nightmare. Trying to say that in a three-minute pop song with 'whoa-oh-ohs' in the background, that almost seemed funny to me. So the challenge is trying to make it feel OK to have those incongruous things live together, and not feel like you're forcing them."

Devine gives much of the credit for the musicality of *Between the Concrete & Clouds* to the team he assembled for the project—all of whom he had worked with at one point or another, but brought together as a unit for the first time. Produced by longtime collaborator Chris Bracco and mixed by Rob Schnapf, the album features the latest iteration of the Goddamn Band: Brian Bonz (keyboard), Chris Bracco (bass, keyboard), Mike Fadem (drums, percussion), Russell Smith (electric guitar), and Mike Strandberg (guitar, mandolin).

"Over the course of *Brother's Blood* and *Bad Books*, I ended up investing a lot more in the

band," he says. "I really wanted this album to be a band project, so I wanted to involve people more than just as hired guns. And I learned to shut up sometimes—whatever the best idea is, that's the best idea, whoever's it is. And the rewards from that letting go are self-evident."

Kevin Devine's excitement about *Between the Concrete & Clouds* is obvious, and well-earned. "The best thing you can do with anything you make," he says, "is to feel like 'I'm in love with it, and I'll live and die with it regardless of what anybody else thinks.' If it ends up being the most successful thing I do, great, but if it's just the next step in the chain, that's great, too.

"This is my favorite thing we've ever done," he continues. "You want it to always feel like that, but you also want to see where it can grow—so right now I'm really satisfied with it, but I know that in a year I'll think, 'We could have done this or done that.' And that, to me, is the reason you keep writing songs and making records. The minute you're like, 'I got it,' then it's time to go do something else."

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