



BLOSSOMING ON THE VINE

The Gourds have grown deep into the tangled roots of Texas music

Our story begins one sweltering night in the dog days of summer in 1991, at the Hole in the Wall, a dive on The Drag (a.k.a. Guadalupe Street) in Austin where a million stories have begun over the years.

I'm talking with a fellow named David Green, who plays drums in a band called the Picket Line Coyotes. Originating in Shreveport, Louisiana, in the mid-'80s, the Coyotes moved to Dallas in the late '80s, issued an LP and a couple of cassettes, and were now migrating down the road to Austin, where their rootsy brand of Replacements-style rock felt naturally at home.

Meanwhile, I'm fixing to flee from Austin after twenty years there, from kindergarten through a history degree at the University of Texas and a gig at the local paper. Seattle is where I'm bound, but suddenly a potential detour to Dallas has presented itself, in the form of a job at the weekly paper there.

Green and I compare notes and half-jokingly mull over the idea that we might simply swap houses. But the deal in Dallas never works out, and I'm off to Seattle a couple months later; meanwhile, the Coyotes move to Austin but end up disbanding shortly thereafter.

End of story. Except that it's also the start of a whole 'nother tale.

Fast-forward, for just a moment, to the present. The Gourds, which eventually rose from the ashes of the Picket Line Coyotes, are one of Austin's premier roots-music bands, a versatile quintet boasting three songwriters and a multitude of instrumental abilities inviting inevitable comparisons to The Band.

The Gourds released three full-length albums and an EP between 1996 and '99, but they've been available only sporadically in the U.S., having been recorded for Dutch label Munich Records and subsequently licensed to Stateside labels in a couple of ill-fated deals.

This fall, however, the band finally landed on solid ground on their home continent with Sugar Hill, which released the Gourds' new album *Bolsa De Agua* in September and reissued *Dem's Good Beeble* and *Ghosts Of Hallelujah* on Halloween (with *Stadium Blitz* and the EP *Gogitchyshinebox* to follow in early 2001).

Back in 1992, however, none of that was even a gleam in the eyes of the erstwhile Coyotes. "I pretty much decided I was gonna quit altogether, and just play for my own enjoyment," says Kevin Russell, recalling the days in the wake of the Picket Line Coyotes' demise. This, of course, is almost invariably how all worthwhile musical pursuits take root, especially in Austin. What blooms most beautifully is the wildflower along the side of the road, not planned or planted, but growing of its own accord.

Those Texas wildflowers tend to grow in clusters, bluebonnets and indian paintbrushes and other highway flora commingling to create a colorful landscape, which serves as a fitting metaphor for the varied yet complementary community that is the Austin music scene. Indeed, Russell was just one link in a circle of friends whose casual projects and performances were sowing the seeds for a particularly fertile period in the city's musical lore.

One of Russell's old Shreveport pals, Ron Byrd, had just moved to town, and the two began playing as a duo, primarily at a cozy little club called Chicago House that nurtured countless singer-songwriters in the late '80s and early '90s. "Chicago House was such a cool, low-key place to play," Russell remembers. "There was a kind of camaraderie with all the people who hung out there."

Looking back at my logs of all the shows I've seen during the 1990s, sure enough, one of Russell's gigs at Chicago House pops up on the list, on March 5, 1993. As fate would have it, I actually took in two shows that night; after

seeing Russell, I headed over to Liberty Lunch to hear Uncle Tupelo. Which will work its way back into this tale a few years down the road.

While Russell was going about the business of not having a career, Picket Line Coyotes bassist Jimmy Smith had taken an even sharper left turn. Smith, a native of the Dallas area who had joined the Coyotes shortly after they moved there from Shreveport, moved to the small East Texas town of Nacogdoches, a self-imposed sabbatical designed in part to nurture his increasing interest in songwriting.

"I wanted to try and see where I stood as a songwriter at the time, because I was really inspired by Kevin's material in the Coyotes," Smith says. "And I'd been reading a lot of things that pointed me in the direction of solitude. So, I was seeing a girl, and she was going to school out there in Nacogdoches. So when the Coyotes broke up, I thought, this is the perfect opportunity to get outta town and live in a small town and see how the writing would come along."

He ended up with a few dozen tunes, a considerable well from which he has drawn repeatedly over the last decade. "I spent a lot of my time just realizing these songs, without anybody looking over my shoulder, just a really uninhibited kind of situation," he says. "But after about a year of flipping burgers and playing open mikes, I had a falling-out with the girlfriend, and was really wanting to get back to town and form a band. And definitely Kevin was first on my list to hook up with when I got back."

It took some time for that to happen. Russell wasn't yet convinced he wanted to dive back into a band situation yet, but the Coyotes' former manager, Phyllis Arp, encouraged him to record some of his new material for a possible solo record. "Phyllis was constantly hounding me to do that, and I didn't want to,



VINE RIPENED: The Gourds (l. to r.) Max Johnston, Kevin Russell, Keith Langford, Jimmy Wmth, Claude Bernard.

PHOTOGRAPH BY TODD V. WOLFSON

but she got me some recording time at Cedar Creek," Russell says. "And I did a recording there that's still sitting in the can. That's basically how the Gourds started, I think, because that was the first time we'd all played together."

Smith had brought Claude Bernard, who at the time was playing melodica and sometimes drumming, into the fold. "Jimmy and Claude had a two-man band called Old Government that played one show, I think, at the Hole in the Wall," Russell remembers. Bernard was the brother of Rob Bernard, an original member of the Coyotes lineup whose departure from the band shortly after the move to Austin had triggered its demise.

A key motivating factor turned out to be the formation of Prescott Curlywolf, a hard-rocking band led by Rob Bernard and Russell's other old Shreveport pal, Ron Byrd. Russell, Smith, Byrd and Claude Bernard had formed a short-lived band called the Grackles which Russell refers to as a "Gourds prototype," but Byrd was gravitating toward harder-edged material.

"When the Curlywolf got going, I got kinda envious," Russell confesses. "It was like, you know, 'That sucks, those guys have a band, I need to go get a band.' So it was good sort of friendship competition that got me off my ass to do it again." Russell, Smith and Claude Bernard eventually recruited Charlie Llewellyn to play drums, and the Gourds were born.

Unlike Prescott Curlywolf, or for that matter the Picket Line Coyotes, the Gourds were envisioning a more acoustic direction, one that would draw deeply from traditional Texas roots. This was partly a natural outgrowth of the relocation to Austin, which was rife with musicians who reveled in ravaging the boundaries between rock and country, punk and folk, and so on.

Russell cites the early '90s Austin heyday of the Bad Livers, as well as Dallas band Killbilly (whose lineup had included Livers bassist Mark Rubin), as turning points. "They made me see that you could use these instruments and you could play any kind of song you wanted," he says. "And I guess I kind of already knew that, but just to see somebody do it always makes you realize it.

"Those were really inspiring times. There was just an energy about that band, and those times around here. To me it was really exciting to see the Bad Livers doing what they were doing, and so many people coming to see them do it."

In 1996 the band released *Dem's Good Beeble*, a modest but promising debut highlighted by Russell's sterling country-folk ditty "Clear Night" and Smith's more soulful "Caledonia". *Stadium Blitz* followed in 1997, sporting new staples such as Smith's jaunty "LGO" and Russell's swampy "Magnolia".

From the start, instrumental versatility was a key to the Gourds' success. Russell plays guitar, mandolin and banjo; Bernard plays accordion and guitar; Smith plays bass and guitar. All three are also credited with percussion on *Stadium Blitz*, though the band has always had a drummer. Llewellyn left in 1998 and was replaced by Russell's brother-in-law, Keith Langford, who had played with both Prescott Curlywolf and the Damnations.

The story of how Langford ended up in the band illustrates the interplay within the Austin music community. "When Charlie first quit the band, Keith was our first thought," Russell says. "But at the time, Keith was in the Damnations, he was in Curlywolf, and he was also in a band called the Diaz Brothers with Philip McEachern, who's one of my oldest friends. And it was just so many of our friends it would affect, we were hesitant to even try."

Around that time, the Gourds had a brief regional tour scheduled and decided to ask the Damnations to open the shows, partly so Langford could double up as drummer for both bands. "I kinda knew in the back of my mind that, one way or the other, Keith was gonna end up playing with us, and these shows were gonna be the reason," Russell confesses. "After the first show, I was sitting and talking to the girls [Damnations co-leaders Amy Boone and Deborah Kelly], and they were like, 'Man,

Keith is so good with you guys, it's amazing.' And I was like, 'Yeah, I wish he was our drummer!'

"After that string of shows, you know, it kind of was an ongoing dialogue. Keith wanted to play with us, but he didn't want to do wrong by his friends. He was definitely torn about what to do. And then Deborah and Amy, in their infinite wisdom, they fired him! [Laughter] They said, 'You're fired, Keith, we don't want you to play drums for us anymore.' Which just tells you how much they care about Keith."

Another 1998 lineup addition considerably upped the ante for the band. Max Johnston, a member of latter-day Uncle Tupelo and early Wilco who had subsequently spent a couple years in Freakwater, moved from Kentucky to Austin and brought his adept skills at fiddle, banjo, mandolin and slide guitar to the group. Though Johnston's background is in bluegrass, he has become an expert at playing in rock-oriented ensembles, exhibiting an extraordinary feel and a sympathetic ear toward the strengths of a song.

"I started playing all these instruments because I wanted to be one of the guys at the bluegrass festival," Johnston explains. "When I sit around in my room, I play to bluegrass records and country records and stuff like that. ...But I've always been asked to make this bluegrass thing that I do somehow fit into a rock song. It's been very interesting and very challenging."

He's also broadened the Gourds' horizons with his budding talent as a songwriter and singer. Two of the standout tracks on *Bolsa De Agua* are Johnston's "Jesus Christ (With Signs Following)" and "O Rings". Still, don't expect Johnston to seek the spotlight anytime soon. "I've been writing a lot, but I'm a little shy about just putting out a Max record," he says. "That's never been too interesting to me, because I enjoy having my songs come out in a serious band context."

Smith, on the other hand, hasn't hesitated to find other outlets for his overflow of material. Earlier this year he put together an album of homemade four-track recordings that he's been selling on the internet, at shows, and in local stores. "But I did it all with Gourds being front-burner," he's quick to point out. "A lot of people might assume that I'm starting to veer away from the band, but that assumption's completely off."

In fact, Smith is interested in seeing the Gourds become an even more fully integrated unit, recently suggesting to his bandmates that they try to write songs together instead of bringing them in separately. "I think it might be time to kind of set our egos aside and try



M.C. Records Presents

Americana Legend Sleepy LaBeef's First Studio Recording in Four Years!

Tomorrow Never Comes

With Special Guest Maria Maldur Recorded in 2000 in Nashville!

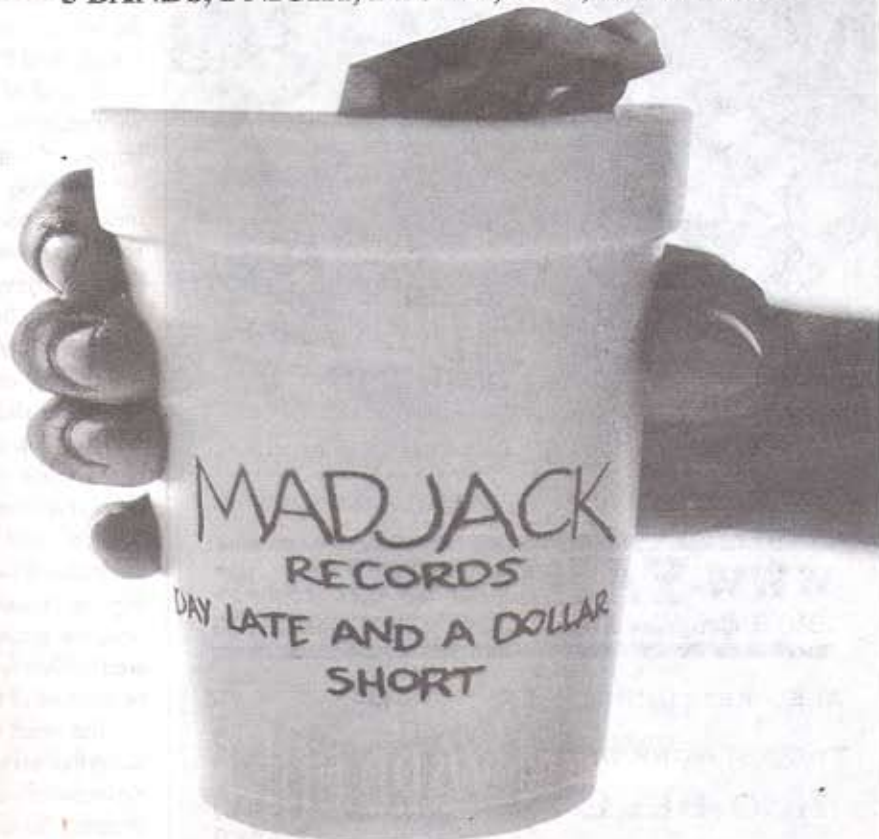
"Sleepy LaBeef's Americana roots music has never seemed more flavorful." Boston Globe

To check out Sleepy's tour dates and to listen to a sample of **Tomorrow Never Comes** check out our web site www.mc-records.com

Available at fine record stores or call 1-888-562-2779 for credit card orders.

M.C. Records P.O. Box 1788 Huntington Station NY 11746
Ph: 631-754-8725 Fx: 631-262-9274 e-mail: mc@mc-records.com

5 BANDS, 1 NIGHT, 1 TOWN, 1 CD, ALL LIVE



MADJACKRECORDS.COM

NEW BLUE PAINTINGS

BY JON LANGFORD



December 2 through December 31, 2000

See the artwork on the website and at the gallery

WWW.YARDDOG.COM

1510 S. Congress Austin, TX 78704 512.912.1613

ALSO FEATURING
THE ARTWORK OF
**RICO BELL
& JAD FAIR**



and do something of a more collaborative nature," he says. "I think the next step would be forming the songs with all five of us."

Beyond their own material, another defining characteristic of the Gourds has been their creative choices of cover songs — most notably a backwoods hillbilly reworking of Snoop Doggy Dogg's hip-hop anthem "Gin & Juice" that appeared on the 1998 *Gogitchy-shinebox* EP.

"That song in particular is just a really great hook," he says. "I wanted to do it, but I knew I wouldn't ever attempt to rap. And then one day I just started playing those two chords that the chorus is in, and I just tried to sing the words as I read 'em, and it came out that way.

"I played it for a friend of mine's birthday party one night, and everybody just loved it. So one night at the Electric Lounge, I was like, 'Let's do that "Gin & Juice" song, guys. And they were like, 'Are you crazy?' And I said, 'It's just two chords, man. I know the words, you just play these two chords, and it'll be fine.' And we did it, and of course everybody went crazy. It's amazing what has happened with that song."

Amazing is an understatement of the convoluted circuits the song has traveled within the past year, courtesy of the fanatical bootlegging habits of Phish fans and the influence of the internet. Apparently, at Phish's Y2K New Year's Eve show, a pirate radio station set up in the campground of the venue gave repeated airplay to the Gourds' version of "Gin & Juice", and a bootleg copy of the radio show started circulating via Napster. Only problem was, the pirate DJs never bothered to identify the Gourds as the performers of the song.

The result was massive confusion that led to the recording being incorrectly attributed to a slew of artists. "So now, on Napster, you can get our version of 'Gin & Juice' by pretty much any hippie

jam band you want," Russell says. "Our version is under Widespread Panic, Ween, Phish, String Cheese Incident, Leftover Salmon — nobody knows who did it."

Eventually some clarification has arisen. "Yahoo did a little story on it that was pretty good, and all the Phish fan sites have corrected it and made it plain who did it," Russell continues. "And most of the Napster chat rooms, they always correct people who come in there asking."

It's the kind of phenomenon that garners a lot of attention but could also lead to the perception that the Gourds are a novelty band. "It's been a test of time for us, dealing with it," Russell admits. "At first we loved it, and then the guys got really down about it. But it won us a lot of new fans, and people bought our other records, and a lot of them like the Gourds now because they heard that song."

It's a clear night in South Austin, the Sunday finale of another South by Southwest weekend in March 2000. A few hundred people have gathered in the spacious, rambling backyard of Leeann Atherton, a local singer-songwriter whose annual SXSW closing parties have become a tradition.

Late in the evening, the Gourds amble up to the funky little wooden stage and ease their way into an hour-long set. Ultimately, it's a cover song that captures the moment, but this ain't no Snoop Dogg tune. When the band launches into "Nuevo Laredo", everyone in the place is overtaken by memories of the song's author, Doug Sahm.

In essence, Sahm epitomized everything the Gourds aspire to be. "What we do musically comes almost directly from what he did," Russell acknowledges, though he clarifies that it wasn't exactly a direct relation.

"We were well on our way before we really ever knew that much about Doug," he continues. "I think a lot of it has to do with



DOUG SAHM onstage with the Gourds at Electric Lounge, Austin, Texas, January 1999.

the culture of Austin, and Texas, being just such a diverse musical place. If you're aware of what's happened in the past, you can't help but reflect that. And Doug was a huge part of that history. Seeing his connection to even the older forms of Texas music, he knew so much about it. So much died with him."


Sahm's death at age 58 in November 1999 hit everyone in the Austin music community hard, but it struck the Gourds deeper than most. They'd recently recorded a couple tracks with Sahm for his *S.D.Q. '98* disc, and had plans to record a full album together.

"He was gonna finish that country record [*The Return Of Wayne Douglas*, which came out posthumously this year], and after he was done with that, we were gonna make a whole record with him," Russell says. "When we were doing those sessions for those two songs on that record, we spent a lot of time just sittin' around playin' in the living room of the studio. Every now and then he'd play one of his songs that he'd never recorded, and he had tons of 'em, and every one of 'em was just amazing. And we were like, 'Man, wow! You gotta do that song, you gotta do this song' — but we didn't have time at that session, so we were gonna record all these songs that he'd never done. Man, it just kills me. It was so sudden."

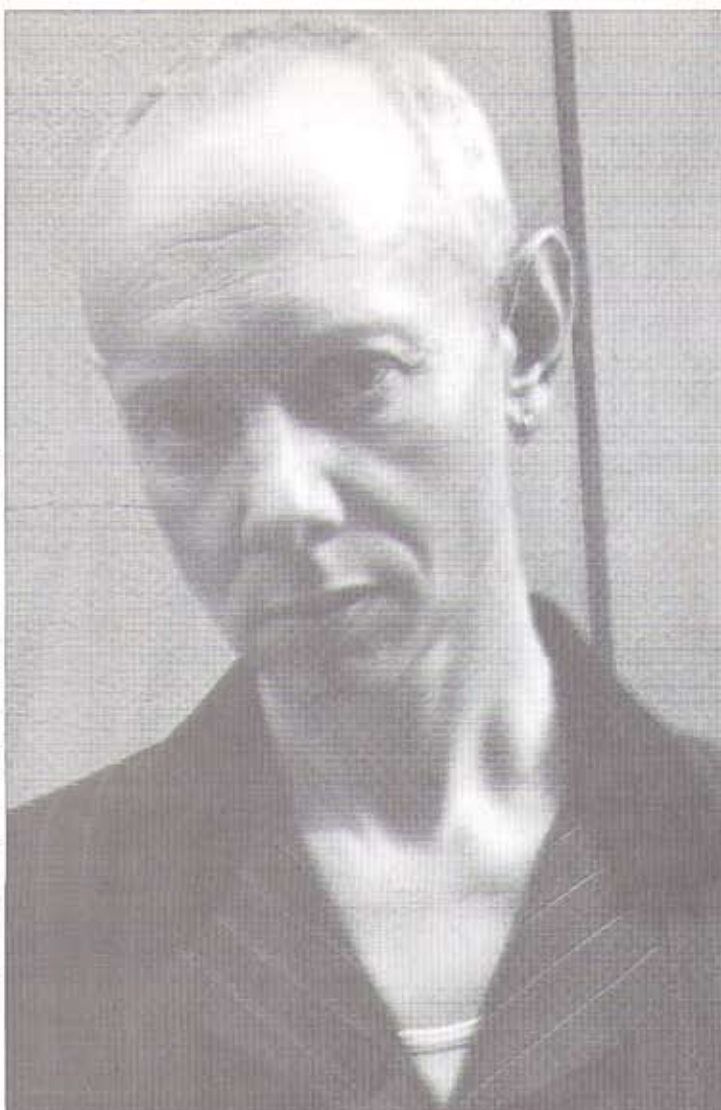
Despite the lost opportunity, the Gourds have a vivid memory

of Sahm they'll forever cherish. "There was a festival in Belgium that Doug had played at the night before, and we were playing the next day," Russell retells. "And so we played that song 'At The Crossroads' in our show that night. We didn't know if he was still there or not, but one of the promoters of the festival, told Doug, 'Hey, listen!' And Doug was like, 'Oh man, they're playing my song!' And the promoter's like, 'Go sing!'"

"So he finally walked up there, and the crowd was all cheerin', and he just took the mike and did his thing, and sang the song with us. I got chills. I looked around and there he was, and I was like, YES! Oh man, it was really a joy."

He also left Russell with a few words that will stay with him always. "He once told me something that made me feel really good. He was talking about the Armadillo days, when Willie came to play there, and he used to play with them. And he said, 'You know, Willie was the old guy and he was passing it on to us. And I'm doing the same thing right here to you guys. I'm passing it on to you.'" 

Among the other Gourds gigs in No Depression co-editor Peter Blackstock's live-music logs is a December 18, 1998, performance at the Electric Lounge, which followed a show earlier that night at Antone's by Doug Sahm's Texas Tornados.



JOE JACKSON NIGHT AND DAY II

10 ALL NEW SONGS

WRITTEN, PERFORMED AND PRODUCED BY JOE JACKSON

WITH SPECIAL GUEST MARIANNE FAITHFULL

ON TOUR THIS DECEMBER

CHECK JOEJACKSON.COM FOR DATES AND INFO



WWW.SONYCLASSICAL.COM

available at all

BORDERS

www.borders.com

for store locations call 888.811.BOOKS or shop online anytime at www.borders.com

© and ™ Sony Classical. Dig. U.S. Pat. & TM Off. Marco Figueredo / © 2000 Sony Music Entertainment Inc.