

THE GOURDS



AUSTIN, TEXAS' THE GOURDS HAVE NEVER BEEN MUCH ON SENTIMENT. Since the band started defining Gourds Music, as it has come to be known, with *Dem's Good Beeble* in 1997 and the quirky *Stadium Blitz* in 1998, they have chugged through America fueled by music and a near-pathological need for a good time. And while songwriters Kevin Russell and Jimmy Smith have written the most dense, reference-laden country songs of the last 10 years and almost single-handedly made a place for deep thought in a genre of "Honky Tonk Badonkadonks" they have, for the most part, shied away from the tear-in-my-beer ballads that made country music a commercial powerhouse over the last 50 years.

But on this go-round with *Noble Creatures*, Russell and company have put the irony and redneck post-modernism on the backburner for a bit, instead building their ninth studio release around a single song, a song based on an accident. Upon fiddling around with a ukulele chord book while spending time with his young daughter, Kevin strummed a few chords that were like a glass of ice water to the face. "I was messing around with this ukulele chord book and I stumbled upon this C to E minor chord progression that's really simple, but it woke my ears up." "I just started messing around with it and that's how the melody for "Promenade" was written," says Russell in his everyman Texas drawl. "I knew when I wrote that song I wanted it to be on the album but I wasn't sure it had a place in the Gourds. It's not the type of thing we usually do." Faced with what is surely the most stirring and beautiful song he has ever written, Kevin set out to make it fit into the Gourds canon. "I knew there had to be more ballads on the album so that "Promenade" would have some context. I couldn't just throw it on the usual Gourds record." As a result *Noble Creatures* sports a somber soul not found on any album to date. Despite some initial trepidation, Russell soon warmed to the idea of a different sort of Gourds album, "I wasn't really sure how all the ballads would sound with the band just because they aren't really our style traditionally, but for some reason I thought it would be cool just because we had never done anything like it before, and now seemed like as good a time as any. Luckily the guys liked the songs!"

Following show-piece "Promenade" is "Last Letter," where a lazy rhythm guitar lays the foundation for Russell's soaring, perfect hillbilly wail as well as the prettiest damn fiddle work Max Johnston has ever laid down. "Moon Gone Down" keeps the morale up with its slow honky-funk guitar line and laissez-faire back porch philosophy. "Steeple Full of Swallows" closes out the ballads dripping with star-bright banjo picking and Claude Bernard's ambient organ movements all draped over an impressionistic lyrical take on Austin slacker life.

In addition to an unprecedented number of ballads, *Noble Creatures* also features another Gourds rarity, horns.

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"How Will You Shine" is the first track on the album and it seethes with a desperate energy that is the result of Kevin Russell's emotional lyrical outpouring. After some prodding, Kevin offers, "I do rather detest the whole confessional bit. Be that as it may, this song is very much a meditation on the phenomenon of growing weary with life while still maintaining hope and inspiration." Unprecedented for Russell and the Gourds as a whole, "How Will You Shine" offers up deeply personal observations on the struggle we all experience living in a fragmented modern world. "The chorus is a list of desires spiraling until the realization that one must be clear in their expression of feelings and wants if they are to find some relief and contentment." The song perfectly reflects Russell's juxtaposition of despair and hope with the positioning of the tune's declarative lyrical urgency against a sunny-day musical vibe, all crowned perfectly by bright, soaring horns.

While a ukulele chord book served as Russell's surprise tool for shaping *Noble Creatures*, for the other half of The Gourds' dynamic songwriting duo, Jimmy Smith, it was drywall and elbow grease that molded his songwriting. "I built myself a place to work in the carport behind my house and it made all the difference." Following the birth of his second child, things were a bit hectic around the Smith household. "It's just a 10x20-foot room where I have all my gear set up and a reel to reel to record demos. I would just get in there by myself and work the songs out. That room is the reason I was able to write these songs. I mean, once I got in there they just all came flooding out."

In "A Few Extra Kilos" Smith sings "Spillage in the morning, and again in the night / Spillage to the left of me, I'm gonna catch it on the right." The tune came about after a day of yard work brought on a bout of body-image issues. "I was mowing the grass with my shirt off and I caught a glimpse of myself in the car window. I thought, 'Damn, look at all that spillage!' The word just sort of stuck in my head." In signature Smith style, lyrically the tune waivers back and forth between off-the-cuff references (Dr. Strangelove, etc.) and non sequiturs to thoughtful takes on time and growing older. Even though it was spawned by a rather superficial thought, "A Few Extra Kilos" offers some typically veiled Gourdisian commentary on society, "It was really intended as an anthem to anti-consumerism."

Despite the album's shining ballads, *Noble Creatures* is by no means divorced from the musical persona The Gourds have built through seminal albums like *Bolsa de Agua*, *Cow Fish Fowl or Pig*, *Blood of the Ram* and *Heavy Ornamentals*. The kaleidoscopic-country sound the band has become known for rages on. And while Russell's songs move the band into beautiful and unfamiliar territory, Smith succeeds in keeping *Noble Creatures* close to home with what he calls, "solid Gourds grooves" that are sure to be new live favorites and are guaranteed to serve as the soundtrack to barbecues and house parties from Austin to god knows where. With *Noble Creatures*, The Gourds have ensured that their musical legend will move past adjectives like witty or ironic and on toward more profound descriptives like classic and timeless, helping them to take their rightful place as some of today's greatest American songwriters.

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