

Kieran Kane, Kevin Welch, and Fats Kaplin

Inspired by the indelible Appalachian groove of an old Bascomb Lamar Lunsford tune, three Nashville veterans fashioned an exuberant acoustic-roots album that topped the Americana radio charts.



WHAT THEY PLAY

KIERAN KANE

- **Acoustic Guitars:** Early '60s Guild student model; recent Gibson L-1 reissue.
- **Strings:** Elixir Polyweb mediums.

KEVIN WELCH

- **Acoustic Guitars:** 1959 Martin 00-18; various small-bodied Gibsons; 1930s Gibson Carson J. Robinson; early '90s Gibson J-185 reissue.
- **Strings:** Elixir mediums (J-185); Elixir lights (Martin).
- **Capo:** Kyser.

FATS KAPLIN

- **Acoustic Guitar:** 1950s Kay parlor.
- **Strings:** Elixir medium gauge (.013-.056).
- **Amplification:** Old Bill Lawrence pickup; Alamo Montclair Reverb amp.
- **Electric guitar:** 1964 Danelectro 1.
- **Picks:** Large National thumbpick and custom-made fingerpicks.

In 1995, Kieran Kane and Kevin Welch veered out of the Nashville mainstream and, with Tammy Rogers and Harry Stinson, formed a record label, Dead Reckoning (www.deadreckoners.com), so they could independently record and release their own CDs. These “Dead Reckoners,” and others, including guitarist Mike Henderson and multi-instrumentalist Fats Kaplin, have appeared in loose confederations on one another’s outlaw-country albums over the past decade. But after swapping songs on a festival stage in 2000, Kane and Welch forged a tighter alliance that has morphed into an ongoing band with Kaplin, and the eponymous trio has charged to the forefront of the roots-oriented, acoustic Americana scene.

The Oklahoma-bred Welch and native New Yorkers Kane and Kaplin, who all migrated to Nashville decades ago, were drawn together by a shared affection for traditional music and a belief in an organic, spontaneous approach to music making. Individually, they had experienced considerable mainstream success—Kane with songwriter Jamie O’Hara in the O’Kanes; Kaplin as first-call studio instrumentalist; Welch as a solo artist and composer (for Waylon Jennings, Roger Miller, Ricky Skaggs, and others)—before eventually growing disenchanted with the big record companies’ “K-Mart way of thinking,” as Welch describes it.

Since taking off on their maverick path, Kane and Welch have released critically acclaimed solo albums, as well as collaborations with other Reckoners. But their two CDs with Kaplin, 2004’s *You Can’t Save Everybody* and this year’s *Lost John Dean* (both Dead Reckoning/Compass, www.compassrecords.com) made bigger splashes—both reached No. 1 on the Americana radio chart, and last summer the trio was nominated for Duo/Group of the Year at the fifth annual Americana Honors and Awards.

Lost John Dean combines the gravitas of Kane and Welch’s voices and lyrics with the exuberant interplay of Kaplin’s fiddle, accordion, pedal steel, acoustic and electric guitars, Welch’s acoustic guitar, and Kane’s banjo, guitar, octave mandolin, and percussion. Although Kane, Welch, and Kaplin say they didn’t set out to preserve roots music per se, their work resonates with the plaintive sound of old-time Appalachian string bands and strains of blues, bluegrass, Celtic, Gypsy-jazz, and honky-tonk. Indeed, part of the inspiration for the album was a mix tape of

DON’T BELABOR A SONG

Both Kieran Kane and Kevin Welch let spontaneity guide the songwriting process.

“I write very quickly,” says Kane. “I rarely go back and edit. I like the first impression, so I don’t labor on things very long. There are songs that have taken me years to write, but if you put the total time down that I actually spent working on a song, it wouldn’t be more than a few hours. If I get stuck on a second verse, I may just leave it and then keep picking the guitar up and singing the first verse and chorus to see if the second just presents itself.” Welch concurs. “I take a lot longer with most of my songs than Kieran does,” he says, “but if I’m poking at a song and things aren’t flowing out, I’ll stop and put it aside, and I might open up another song.”

SCOTT SANDMAN-ALLEN

by Céline Keating

"archaic early country blues" tracks given to Kaplin and Kane by singer-songwriter Paul Burch. "Both of us are reasonably schooled in that [music]," Kane says, "having grown up listening to the Stanley Brothers and the New Lost City Ramblers, but this record was full of songs that we had never heard before. There was one—'Lost John Dean,' by Bascomb Lamar Lunsford—that sounded like it was recorded in a hotel room, and you could not understand a word of it, but it was one of the coolest groove songs."

"I think there's a real thread that runs through [Lost John Dean]," Kaplin says, describing that thread as "a really strong rhythm groove." He explains the rhythmic foundation of their version of Willie Dixon's "Mellow Down Easy": "Kevin started doing this hambone thing on his legs and his chest, and that really made the recording. And it set the tone for the rest of the CD." You can hear the primacy of groove in the pulsing beat of "Monkey Jump," the bluesy gait of "Satan's Paradise,"

"We keep it as live as possible in the studio," says Kieran Kane. "That's the way to make records that age well."

Kane's plunky old-timey banjo on "Them Wheels Don't Roll," Welch's delicate finger-picking on "Clean Getaway," and Kaplin's evocative oud plucking on "Mr. Bones."

Bare-bones arrangements—"Postcard from Mexico" is stripped down to one acoustic guitar, one electric, and Kane hitting his banjo case with the drumstick—and spontaneous recording sessions give *Lost John Dean* its timeless quality. "We keep it as live as possible in the studio," Kane says, "That's the way to make records that age well. That's why Carter Family records sound as good as they do today. Our stuff is live. We can't fix anything. But as a result of doing it like that, we can go onstage now and play virtually every track on the record, and that's pretty rare." **AC**



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