

DUO-VER

King fingerpicker **LEO KOTTKE** and bass maven **MIKE GORDON** are at it again, this time on the calypso-flavored *Sixty Six Steps*.

THEY WERE, TO SAY THE LEAST, AN UNLIKELY DUO: Leo Kottke, legendary fingerpicker and foremost exponent of what the late John Fahey called "American Primitive Guitar," and Mike Gordon, bassist for America's favorite neo-hippie jam band Phish. Kottke, the spiritual father of two generations of acoustic fingerstyle guitarists, had for 35 years been strictly a solo guy. Gordon was the beating heart of a beautifully calibrated improvisational unit.

For all that, *Clone*, Kottke and Gordon's 2002 collaborative debut, was hailed by critics and fans of both artists as a huge success—one of those rare instances where two very different musicians not only create something new and exciting, but raise the level of each other's playing in doing so.

If the surprise of *Clone* was that Kottke and Gordon's musical molecules, once combined, shifted and rearranged into something fresh and vital, *Sixty Six Steps* (RCA Victor), their just-released second effort, will jolt anew. As a child Gordon spent considerable time in the Bahamas, where he fell under the spell of the islands' music. He wanted to recreate those sounds, elements of which he heard in Kottke's syncopated playing. In Nassau, he and Neil Symonette, a local percussionist, laid down some grooves, after which he teamed up with Kottke to work on songs and arrangements. They recorded the album at Nassau's Compass Point Studios.

The result is as potent as a Gombay Smash. Enhanced by Symonette's deft per-

BY CÉLINE KEATING

cussive touch on everything from cowbells to goats' hooves, the calypso flavor is so breezy it nearly camouflages the music's rhythmic and harmonic complexity. On both original compositions and covers, notably the standout rendition of Aerosmith's "Sweet Emotion," guitar and bass renounce their usual roles and partner in an ecstatic dance of freewheeling improvisation.

Kottke, who, as he did on *Clone*, largely departs from his chord-based percussive picking style—and the dense sound he says "drives bass players nuts"—sounds so loose on *Sixty Six Steps* that he might be swinging in a hammock. Gordon, meanwhile, is his usual perpetually moving self, laying a solid rhythm foundation as he maintains a constant flow of harmonic conversation with his fingerpicking partner.

Even Kottke's gruff deep voice and Gordon's light tenor complement each other. But if the way they reconcile their many dissimilarities provides much of *Sixty Six Steps*' spark, ultimately it soars because of how they mesh as people—both are wry, introspective and open to new challenges.

In some mysterious way, these affinities allow them to do what successful musical partners, from Gilbert and Sullivan to Lennon and McCartney to Betts and Allman have always done: They bring out the best in each other.

GUITAR WORLD ACOUSTIC

Other than the fact that you've added percussion to the mix, how does *Sixty Six Steps* differ from *Clone*?

LEO KOTTKE The main difference is that this one was largely Mike's idea. And we just took a much bigger bite, period. In *Clone* we were curious in finding things and recording them. In this we knew what we could do, and our appetite was bigger. We pushed much harder coming off the starting block.

GWA Leo, *Sixty Six Steps* starts off with "Living in the Country," a song you recorded on *My Feet Are Smiling* [1972]. There was a whiff of calypso in that earlier version—is that why you and Mike included it here?

KOTTKE "Living in the Country" is the tune that liberated my right hand. Pete



GEAR

Kottke

Taylor Leo Kottke Signature six- and 12-string guitars, Del Vecchio resophonic

Gordon

Modulus electric bass, Gibson Firebird reissue, Lakland hollowbody, Cura Cubus Saz (Turkish banjo/mandolin-type instrument)

Seeger put it on a record called *The Bitter and the Sweet*. I was stunned by that thing, the way it leaves the right hand open instead of locked into patterns. You hear that in the guitar playing of Joseph Spence, a Bahamian, but I didn't know about him, although I did hear Pete say, "I stole that, it's some Bahamian work song." Mike picked up on that. He's a very perceptive musician; it's really uncanny.

MIKE GORDON Leo's fingerpicking has

almost a swing to it. That groove element that I liked in calypso was there in his playing. That's what led to this project. I started to notice that same kind of rhythm in other songs of his.

GWA Mike, before you and Leo began collaborating, you approached him with a tape on which you added bass lines to one of his pieces. What were you hoping for?

GORDON I had been listening to him since at least '83. In more recent years I

GORDON: "Both of us are probably a bit obsessive-compulsive."
KOTTKE: "Perhaps that's what makes it all work."

thought something got even deeper, more soulful, in his playing. It's hard to put into words. The first time some Phish bandmates and I heard him, we were just stunned. During the quiet parts you could hear a pin drop. One night I heard one of his pieces on the radio and had a little epiphany. I realized I could take a stab at adding sound, to trying to click with him. There are elements to the kinds of runs he does and the combination of clusters of chords and the way they move—these melodic runs and harmonic passages—that resonated with me. But I was wary of adding bass, because I didn't want to ruin it. He's so complete, no other sound is needed. I just thought it might be an opportunity to play something together.

GWA Leo, were you able to tell from the start that Mike's bass would work with your playing?

KOTTKE No. But the first thing I could tell, musically, was that I hadn't heard anybody like him, and certainly not on bass. So you think why is that, what's going on here? Second was realizing that he plays out of a body of knowledge. This wasn't a pile of licks. That held real strong. And then we started bumping into each other and became friends. It's one of those things you can't figure out, it's just there, and it tickles both of us.

GWA It's counterintuitive that bass would fit so well with your music.

KOTTKE The first thing we talked about was how my playing really annoys bassists—I drive them nuts. I'm on the two and the four and I usually play all the roots. I told Mike I had always thought it would be nice to find a bass player who could play the bass like a horn; I've actually offended bass players by asking them to forget what they're really supposed to be doing. But Mike likes the idea of just taking off, just seeing what happens. He's such an educated musician, highly sophisticated. I'm entirely self-taught. I benefit from his sophistication and so do the pieces. Because he doesn't get annoyed by how crowded I am, we can just do what we want, and we really don't get in each other's way.

GWA Mike, you made a comment in an interview once about the importance of reaching a kind of dream state when playing. How do you do that when you're working with someone else?

GORDON We have to exist in parallel universes. Something about my dream state has to have enough in common with the basic elements of the other musician in order for it to work.

GWA How do you prevent your universe from clashing with your partner's?

GORDON It's the paying attention that transports you—that communication and the groove you have together. If you really surrender, it's easier for it to play itself. With Leo it's amazing. He's the only one I know where it's like each of his fingers is a different person playing together.

GWA Leo, how difficult was it for you to

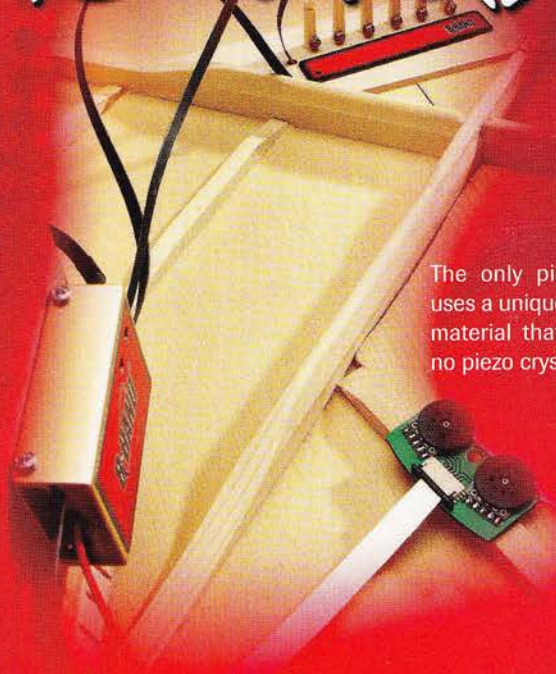
play with Mike?

KOTTKE I've never done this before—it's all brand new. In the studio, I just play my stuff and others join me. With Mike, it's like we're a tiny band.

The newness is what predominates that feeling I have, every time we go on, that, my God, I'm not alone up here. There are two people sharing this. It's so extraordinary for me. It's just hair-raisingly neat.

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GWA Mike, how has your playing been influenced by working with Leo?

GORDON I'm influenced by Leo a lot and in ways I don't always realize. One night on tour with Leo I was in my hotel. I had been working on one tune of his that has a lot of different sections. Suddenly, I had this breakthrough. It's hard to describe. It was not that I was copying his licks or anything that specific, but something about playing with him, and playing his material, just unleashed something. It was as if all the ragtime licks were flowing through my fingers and tying themselves together in ways I had never experienced before. I've noticed this for a while. Play-

ing with him allows me to play in a way I haven't before. It opens up something.

Maybe it starts with the fact that I don't think standard bass lines sound good with his playing. It brings it down to earth—squares it off too much. Having the bass flow sounds better, and it also allows me to do new things. I've played bass lines in jams I've had with him that I never could have played in other situations. There are certainly parts of songs where it's important to have a bass define the chord, but the sense of freedom you have when you're not tied to that is incredible.

GWA Leo, has playing with Mike influenced the way you compose? *Try and Stop Me*,

the solo album you released last year, seems to flow in a different way than your earlier work.

KOTKE Mike saved me on *Try and Stop Me*. I didn't have enough material. And then my dad died and I thought, "I can't do this, I don't have it in me right now." But I remembered two things. One is that, for a lot of musicians, music is connected intimately with loss. The second was, Mike has talked with me about improvisation, the way you can develop your skills with it. I've thought I needed to do more homework. But with Mike I've learned there's something I can draw on. I figured I might as well go there. So a lot of that record was done on the spot. The opening tune, "Monopoly," was largely written, but it hadn't shaken out yet. The rest was very loose. I would frequently just start playing and see where I wound up. And I wouldn't have had the nerve if I hadn't known Mike. I go to school on Mike both explicitly and implicitly.

GWA Coming back to *Sixty Six Steps*: "The Grid" is particularly striking for its interplay. How did you achieve that?

KOTKE It's so sparse that it didn't have any fingerpicking planned for it. And because it's so sparse, you really have to be more careful what you add to keep within the groove. So we tried a bunch of things and it got frustrating. We went to lunch.

GORDON When we got back, Leo picked up a vintage guitar, a Del Vecchio. It had this incredible sound. We rolled the tape and that was the take. It was a whole different concept from what he'd been playing before lunch. He ended up putting in those sparse little stabs, whereas before lunch he played more of a rhythmic pattern. So the whole concept ended up improvised, and then the notes he played were improvised.

GWA So it wasn't the lunch?

KOTKE Frequently, if we're having a problem, we feed the guitar player.

GWA What prompted you to play the Del Vecchio?

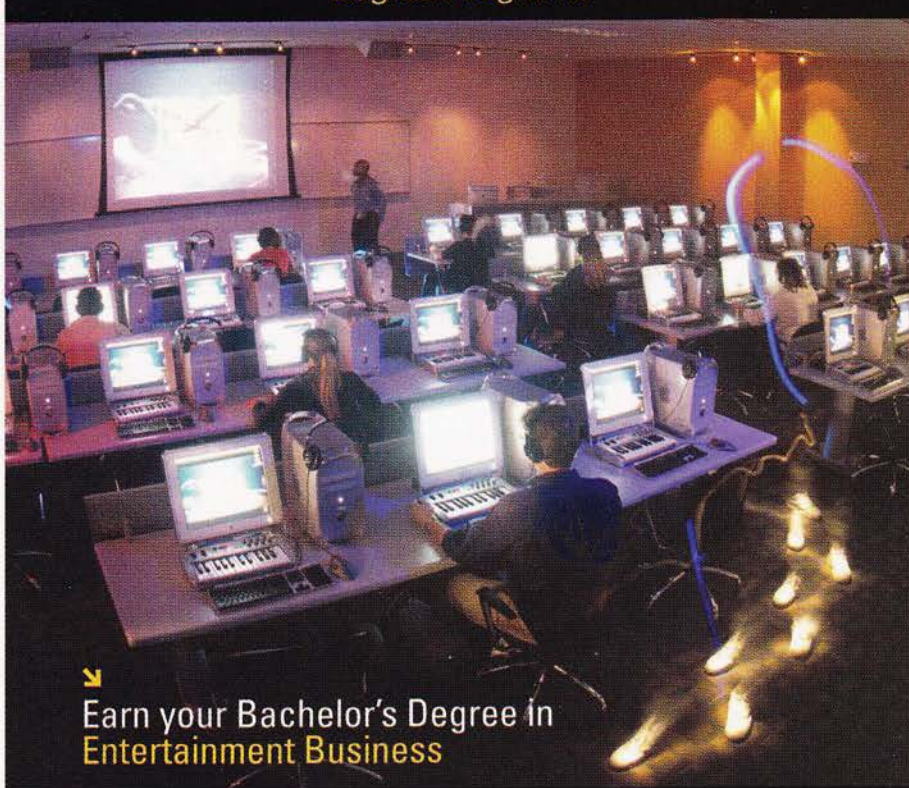
KOTKE I loved the sound of it—it has several resonators in it and I suppose I thought it might work. The studio had one—it was a horrible guitar. The strings were—literally—rusty.

GWA "Cherry County" has a different flavor—very melodic, and with a deceptive simplicity. How did that come about?

GORDON I didn't know whether bass and drum should be added to it, because it sounded so pretty the way Leo played it. I wondered if the dream state would be ruined. You never know what's going to raise or lower the level of passion.

Sometimes I wish musicians would talk about what they're thinking in a given microsecond in that song. There's a microsecond, just when it's going to switch to the IV chord from the main lick, where I lose the beat; it happens

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every time. It's all within one bar, and right in the middle of the second and third beat there's this place that's like infinity for me. I loved that feeling.

KOTTKE It was a time thing. The count shifts, and we drop a beat or add a beat. I found that I didn't need to be in this one spot—and it's my favorite moment in the track. Mike finishes what the guitar is doing and answers it at the same time. It kills me every time I hear it.

GORDON "Balloon" was one of those cuts that required a bunch of takes to get the music right. Leo and I worked on it all day. There's a little lick that it keeps coming back to, and it was spinning in my mind when I went to sleep that night. I woke up at three in the morning to hear the same lick. Leo was playing it. Then I woke up at seven. He was still playing it.

GWA Leo is a bit obsessive?

GORDON Both of us are probably a bit obsessive-compulsive.

KOTTKE Perhaps that's what makes it all work. Sometimes you just can't stop. The thing is, it's so much fun to play. It's so rewarding emotionally.

GWA What about "Over the Dam"?

GORDON That's the one with the complete calypso feel that someone who hasn't grown up in the islands shouldn't be able to get. It has a groove that's dripping with some culture that shouldn't be there with someone like me involved.

GWA For this album, some lyrics are credited to one of you, and some to both. How do you collaborate on lyrics?

GORDON On *Clone* we bounced lines off each other. For *Sixty Six Steps* we brought songs and shared them, helping each other with a few lines here and there.

KOTTKE Lyrics are often the last thing I think of. Frequently I'm stymied. But after playing with Mike a few days the lyrics just happened.

GWA Mike, how's life been post-Phish? What's next for you?

GORDON Not having that going on definitely opened some doors. I knew working with Leo was the first thing I wanted to do. After this tour, the home studio I'm building will be done, and I just want to hunker down and do some writing. Leo and I both have had all kinds of ideas. We seem to go in and out of projects with each other. I can see the next thing we do being even more collaborative. Maybe there won't be any covers or songs we've played before, but just some concepts. Have little jams and maybe carve them into songs.

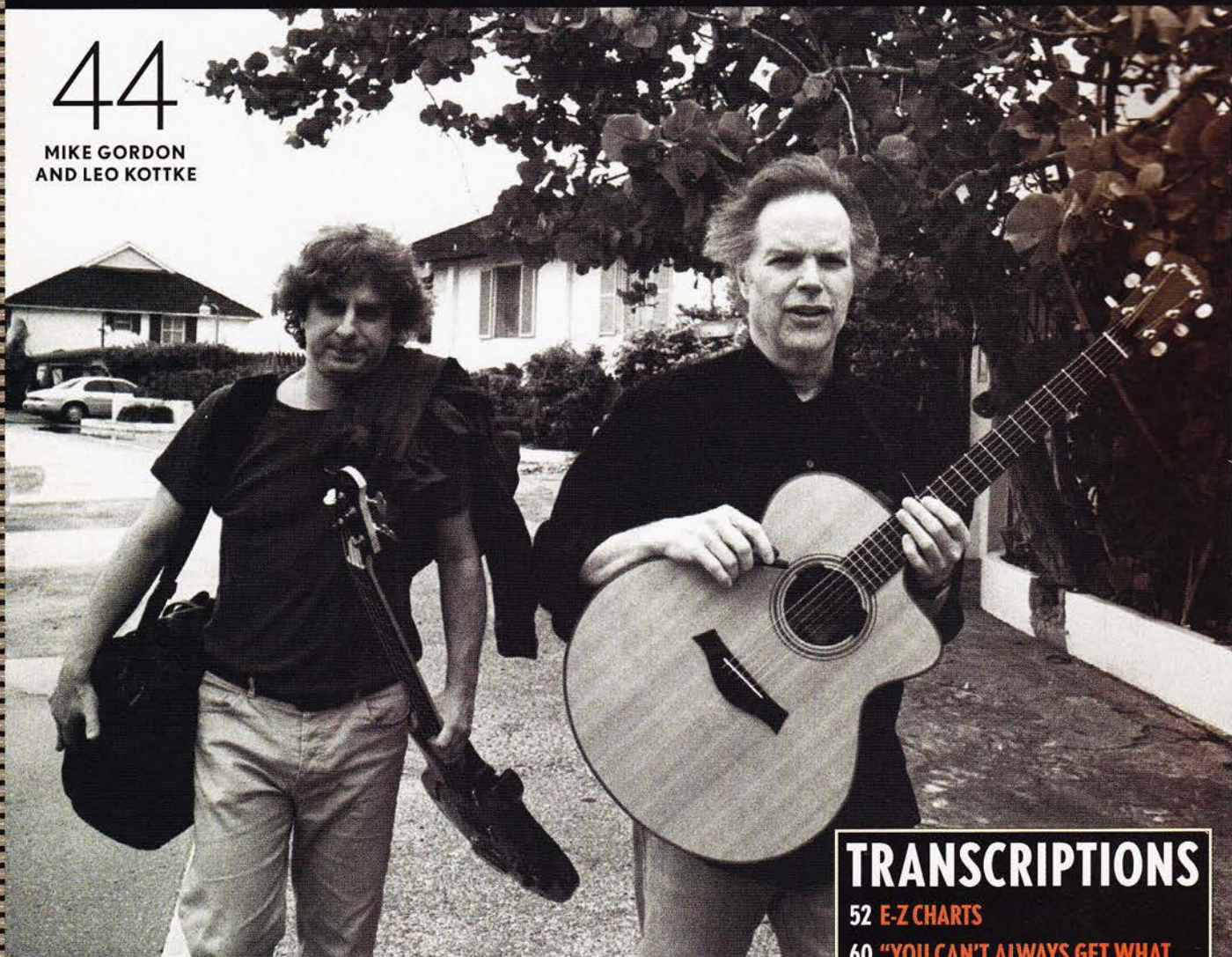
GWA You both seem to get so much out of this collaboration.

KOTTKE I remember one day in Nassau listening to a playback, and Mike and I just looked at each other and smiled. We just lit up. ■

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