

Dirty Linen Magazine

Kevin Connolly: A Detailed Life
by Sheila Daughtry

The gravelly, weatherbeaten voice of Kevin Connolly gives life to vivid vignettes sculpted from painstaking realism. In fine details, he carves out slices of his youth, his life in New England and abroad, and musings on his present.

"I like details," he admitted. "Little details, very common sorts of things. Using real names for things has almost a magical resonance to me."

Connolly's 1995 release, *Little Town* [Eastern Front EFR 106], evokes the freedom of youth and the maturity of a contented married man. Fishing, football, and the Friday night dances of memory mingle with life on the road and its attendant longing for home. "Dancing in the Kitchen" celebrates domestic happiness, even as "Didn't Mean" and "Walk, Laugh, Cry" movingly chronicle the hurts and hopes and joys of long-term love.

Small town New England is a focal point for Connolly's memory. In a litany of places and people he grew up with, he conjures the restlessness and passion of adolescence. Damon's Pint, the Rexicana Ballroom, Peter Buckley and Kristen Lanzetta may seem unusual lyrics to many listeners, but to Connolly, they're road signs on the map of his past. "Kristen Lanzetta," he mused. "I never thought of putting her name in a song but I thought, well, it's an interesting sounding name, she's a real person, and there's something interesting about the resonance of not having ever talked to her again after the age of 16 or so, and now wondering where she is. The act of invoking her name is kind of spooky to me — and kind of cool."

Little Town is an earthy, rhythmic collection of dark-tinged musings, rich ballads and a brief explosion into both soukous and deadpan comedy. And while Connolly admitted to aspiring to be a little more oblique, the lyrics are riddled with the names of places and people. "Names and places and common nouns are beginning points for details, and that's where you can start the story from," he explained. "The thing is embracing those so much and getting them to vibrate so much that they take on something beyond just a realistic type of detail. That suspended belief is something really cool that people do in their writing, that sense of wonder as to whether that experience was really had or not. It's a trick in a way, to be able to stretch it further and further, and really make things up."

Connolly was not a teller of tall tales as a child, nor did he pal around with imaginary friends. "I feel in a way I'm sort of making up for lost time in terms of creating fantasies," he said. Still, he recognizes the importance of reaching beyond his own history when writing songs. "Like could I ever write a cheating song, from my perspective as a very happily married person?" he asked. "I like to say, yeah, I'd like to be able to put myself in the shoes of that person, or that situation. Or could I write another song from the perspective of a woman? This all sounds like writing exercises after a while, but if you can you do that and pull it off, and not make it look like so much of an exercise, but something you actually connect with," he emphasized. "I just wrote a song from an old man's perspective — told his story in various small details.

"Songwriting is all about telling stories," he said. "But that's also limiting in itself, and it's something I'm trying to experiment with. Trying not to be so literate.

"Trying to write so much detail and description, it can get to the point where it gets a little too intentional, and it gets a little contrived. I try to write some songs like that and some songs that don't make sense, and some songs that are more whimsical, and not try to get caught too much in any one style or format. Just because it gets limiting and ultimately, kind of boring."

It's not surprising that Connolly studied literature in school. "In lieu of finding anything else that I could be motivated about," he chuckled. "I started out trying to be very practical about majors and so forth, but I flunked an economics course, and couldn't get a handle on engineering, so I ended up being an English major."

His songwriting has matured as he has. "Up until about three or four years ago," he reflected, "I was writing such personal songs, not having any distance. Three or four years ago I was not as secure a person as I am now, probably more depressed and more self-centered and hung up on stuff.

"It's not less personal now, it's just less painful," he said. "If you dive into the songwriting thing and you're writing really, deeply personal stuff, it's just uncomfortable sometimes for people to

hear that. Because it's too emotional. I think I found a bit of a balance, in terms of talking about stuff that's personal. Because that's life, and music is an expression of heart. And you have to be honest about where you're at. If you're in a hole, I think it's hard for other people to follow you down there. When you're younger, too, you're more into self-pity without really realizing it. When you get a little bit older, you realize that people don't want to listen to you whine anymore."

Though he's gradually moving away from straight autobiography, Connolly does have a wealth of experiences to draw from. In 1969, when he was nine years old, his family joined the Peace Corps. "We were only the seventh family that they allowed into the Peace Corps," he said, "and I don't think they allowed families after us," he laughed. "It might be more than just coincidence. "Both my parents were schoolteachers. I guess that's an introduction to saying that we're liberals," he chuckled. "I think they were at a point where they were disgruntled with the States, and what was happening in the country. They felt frustrated by what was going on in Vietnam, what was going on with Nixon. And they wanted to do something about it. Thank God they didn't send us to where my father wanted to go, which was Sudan. Instead we were sent to the eastern Caribbean."

Connolly's parents taught school in Barbados, and so that he wouldn't lose any educational ground, the Peace Corps footed the bill for young Connolly to attend an English-style prep school. "It was like a Charles Dickens novel," he said, "with obligatory boxing matches every afternoon." A chauffeur drove him to and from the school, dropping him off in the working-class neighborhood where he ran around barefoot with his friends, climbing mango trees and playing with slingshots. "It was a bizarre enough two-year period to remember it all quite vividly."

Coming back to the States wasn't easy. "I had to assimilate back into American culture. My hair was really long, I had these beads. I had black eyebrows, hair bleached blonde from the sun, and a Caribbean accent. I said 'mon' at the end of every sentence. I didn't know how to play baseball, I knew how to play soccer. My first year back, was just embarrassing because I looked like a Beach Boy and I had been trained to stand up at school every time I said anything or I would get whacked."

He did eventually settle back into his old life, graduating from school and joining an advertising agency in Chicago in an attempt to justify all that college tuition. He worked on a Frosted Flakes campaign, but still hadn't written any songs.

"When I graduated from college," he said, "I didn't know what I wanted to do. I had always done music through college. I had a couple bands, I had a little music company where I'd go out and DJ parties. I was in a gospel choir. But I hadn't written anything. I secretly wanted to pursue it full-time, but I didn't have the guts."

While in Chicago, Connolly finally started writing songs and playing out, both in little neighborhood clubs and also as a volunteer in the Joliet State Prison band. When asked what kind of band it was, Connolly just laughed, "A big, mean band." He played a lot of Santana and Stevie Wonder.

"I bought a little four-track and started writing songs. I was not happy in advertising, there was just too much backslapping for me. I wasn't real cut out for the politicking. I didn't have those corporate chops down, how to talk out of both sides of your mouth," he said. "So I decided to start a band and I went back to Boston in 1986 and did side jobs until about three years ago. Waited tables, was a cab driver. I painted houses, taught English at a Catholic boys school — odd jobs here and there. Always involved with music, but definitely needing another job to support myself. "Then things kind of get to a point where you say you've got to totally commit and see if you can live on what you're making. I was very politely fired from my job as a waiter, because I was touring so much. I had changed so many shifts and traded so many shifts because I was starting to travel a lot. The boss came over to me and said, 'We encourage you to pursue your music career full time.'"

And full time it has been. Up until last year, Connolly was still booking himself, as well as acting as his own publicity agent and radio promotion person. The independent Eastern Front label has grown along with Connolly, and is now able to take self-promotion off his hands and give his music national distribution.

His live performances are intense, the focused flow of music and energy interspersed with dry, laconic humor. Connolly's choice of cover material is as revealing as his original work: David

Gray, Richard Thompson, Tom Waits. He's still searching for the lyrics to Ricky Nelson's "Garden Party," planning a wry rendition of the pop song whenever he can find them.

"Performance involves a certain amount of relating to people," he said. "I know that sounds overly simplified, but it's really important to relate to an audience. You realize as a performer that there is something built in between the stage and the people in the audience that needs to be addressed. It's different from time to time, from night to night, but there's always something there. You have to pierce that boundary.

"The other thing that I understand is that performance is meant to be entertaining. People go to a show and they want to be entertained. And that includes humor, that includes insight, that includes honesty and energy. So there's a shtick involved sometimes. I used to really hate it, hate having to think about the fact that a show would be a show. I would feel like Jerry Lewis — kind of show-bizzy, in a Vegas-y sort of way. But it doesn't have to be that way. It can be spontaneous as well as somewhat patterned. And I only learned that from seeing a lot of people that I really enjoy present fun things and riffs and some things that are just introductions to songs, that are part of the act. Once you understand that part of it, you quickly try to forget it as much as possible, and just look at it as just whatever comes up, comes up."

Connolly plans to keep evolving musically. "I'd like to keep experimenting with things and not be tied into any format or style of music," he said. "There's lots of different paths out there. The American-type themes and American-type ideas, and the musical landscape of America is so varied that I can't ever see running out of colors, things to borrow from here and from there."

He accurately pegs his music as motivated by "rhythm and passion and energy." The songs reflect his grounding in an array of roots music styles. "I listen to the old stuff," he says. "Al Green is one of my heroes, and Otis Redding. Old 50s music, Sun Records stuff and rockabilly. Country music, to a degree. Texas singer-songwriters. Old blues guys. world music. I could probably name two or three musical heroes in every category."

Little Town's rich musical blend expands on the acoustic base of Connolly's 1993 debut, *My My My* [Eastern Front EFR 103], which deals largely with the time he spent living in Italy with his wife, who is a chef. He started out teaching at an international school there, but got introductions from several American performers passing through and wound up with gigs for the rest of the year.

He is disappointed with the sound of *My My My*, though he still performs some of the songs from the album. "The record came out before we had distribution, so it's not very widely distributed — which is good, especially if you don't know the songs on the record anymore. People ask for a certain song and you go, 'What?' That happens enough already," he said.

He plans for his next recording to be completely different "as Little Town is from *My My My*. A little bigger, more present. And maybe a little bit weirder, a little more obtuse at times," he smiled, thinking of the evolution (some say devolution) of musical hero Tom Waits.

"You try so hard for so many years just to get people to hear you, to listen for the first time, it makes you try to be more consistent than you ordinarily would be," he said. "Look at somebody like Richard Thompson, the records that he makes these days. Or even John Prine, the record he's just put out. Those represent departures, or chances. Very different sounding but very creative records. It would be nice to get to the point where you could take more chances."

NY Times News Service... "Connolly's music cuts a fairly wide swath through pop music culture, touching on everything from blues to folk to country to rock — and often a combination of all four"

Boston Magazine ... "Best of Boston"

Album Network ... "A songwriter's songwriter, an uncompromising performer and an original personality"

CMJ ... "a startlingly rewarding artist"

Boston Phoenix ... "Literary, serious, reflective, soulful, eclectic, blues-driven, and occasionally goofy ... the crowd needed two encores, a testimony to Connolly's ability to spin his energy into the room."

Constantine Report ... "Connolly writes great songs, and this album serves notice that he will be around for a while."

The Boston Globe ... "A packed house, and a concert that exceeded expectations ... Connolly was a delight."

The Wenatchee (WA) World ... "I was completely inspired that a person could be that good at something, let alone that good of a performer of 20 terrific songs about the dream of living."

KPFK (Los Angeles) ... "A wonderful singer, an imaginative writer, a rare treat to experience."

WGBH-FM (Boston) ... "one of New England's best young singer/songwriters. He pushes his stories beyond conventional standards" **La Republicca (Italian newspaper)** ... "one of the most interesting voices coming out of the American scene today."

Santa Barbara News-Press ... "penetrating imagery that immediately demanded attention ... it's hard to imagine how Connolly has avoided more widespread acclaim and bigger record deals."

Monterey County Herald ... "roots-rock muscle and assured songwriting, humorous but not self-consciously so, deeply emotional without being maudlin ... surely one of the best shows of the year."

Entertainment Times ... "a seductive, thought-provoking compilation of tunes that speak to the universality of the small-town American experience"