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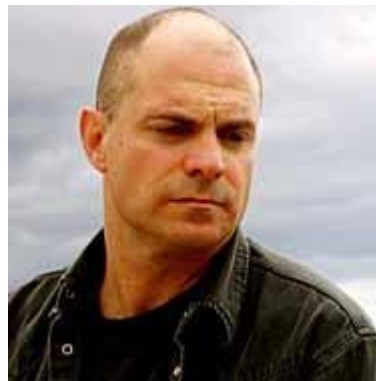
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LIFE & LEISURE

MUSIC SCENE: FOR CONNOLLY, ANYTHING'S POSSIBLE

By JAY N. MILLER
 For The Patriot Ledger

Not every songwriter becomes a chart-busting MTV star, just like not every novelist ends up topping the best-seller list. And just as sometimes the most rewarding books are those that were undiscovered treasures, often the most moving music comes without the benefit of a national advertising campaign or heavy airplay.



Marshfield native Kevin Connolly's latest album, "Mystery Water" is just out on his own Real Records label. (Courtesy photo)

Marshfield native Kevin Connolly plumbs the same heartland Americana musical soil as Bruce Springsteen, John Mellencamp, Dave Alvin and Steve Earle, but with the added resonance of being a native New Englander.

His 1995 album "Little Town" was virtually a musical memoir of growing up in "MarshVegas," and his newest album leads with a semi-autobiographical tune called "Castle Island."

Connolly's latest album, "Mystery Water" is just out on his own Real Records label, and he's performing Saturday night at Tir Na Nog in Somerville. He'll also be playing at The Abbey Lounge in Somerville on Dec. 14.

Far away from the megamillion-dollar stadium, rock-star world, working musicians have to make the kind of decisions Connolly made in 1999.

"Just about the time my daughter turned 2, my wife suggested I get a job," Connolly said, with a hint of a laugh, from his Lexington home. "I might have considered that a shock at one time, but I think part of my evolution artistically was simply changing my perspective. I was ready to accept the idea, so I stopped playing and traveling full time, like I had been doing for years. I've been kind of underground since then, getting this



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SPORTS

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family thing going.

"I've adjusted my ambition: to become a strong regional artist. I'll go off and play a two- or three-day weekend sometimes, but mainly I can find all kinds of places to play within a two or three-hour drive."

That meant wife Liza, daughter Lyla, now 9, and son Nicholas, 6, get to see a lot more of dad. And thanks to experience that began in Marshfield, Connolly found a satisfying day job. After stints working at WEEI and WBCN, he is now the general sales manager at WROR in Boston.

"My radio background stems from working at WATD, which was right across the street from the high school, as a kid in high school," Connolly said. "I began writing sports copy for Bill Wilhelm (WATD's sports director), and continued coming back there during my summers home from college. (DJ) Dick Pleasants is the guy who really introduced me to folk music, and we're still good friends. But having the radio career allows me to focus on my family, and not have to exact a living out of music. I get to go on family vacations, see my kids every night, and it sure beats staying in a Motel 6 every night."

The latest CD is Connolly's seventh release in a career that spans 20 years. Previous efforts, such as "Little Town," used a full band for a muscular folk-rock sound. Connolly still plays a lot of his local gigs with a quartet that includes Scott Rival on guitar, Ducky Carlisle on drums and Scott Comeille on bass. But his new album is a stripped-down acoustic project, with Connolly and Steve Sadler, the multi-instrumentalist most often found playing with the Swinging Steaks, and some percussion from Carlisle, who also produced the CD.

His model for the album was Rick Rubin's American recording sessions with Johnny Cash, which presented the late icon in the starkest, simplest and ultimately most evocative terms.

"When I'm playing with a band, people invariably come up after the show and ask me for two things," said Connolly. "One; they want to hear the sound of the band of record, and then two; they want to hear just me and my guitar doing these songs. That was really the impetus for this album, a desire to keep it simple and not add effects, using technology only for editing.

"I didn't want to go back musically, especially," he explained. "I wanted to explore a new approach to recording, focusing more on just acoustic guitar and my voice. I think it is often easy to get carried away by all the different colors you can have with more instruments. The theme of this recording is very simple and boiled down music.

"I will continue to play some gigs with bands, but I'm also open to doing more intimate coffeehouse settings - although not being exactly folk about it."

Connolly's work has been described by the New York Times as "touching on everything from blues to folk to country to rock - and often a combination of all four ..." He likes his music to be called Americana.

"That Americana category hadn't really blossomed when I released my last album," he said, referring to 2001's "Long Conversations."

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"If we agree that it refers to American songwriting that utilizes American roots influences like jazz, blues, country, and whatever else, then it's a label I'm really comfortable with."

The new CD's 11 songs include nine new Connolly originals. He also covers Ray Bonneville's "Listen," a jaunty reverie about a crystal ball, and Lucinda Williams' "Blue."

Among the originals, "Castle Island" deals with the struggles Connolly's father had when he returned from the Korean War and tried to find work in Boston. It's overlaid with an aura of menace and barely concealed strife of a hardscrabble workingman's life in South Boston and Dorchester at that time. "Mystery Water" is a youthful reminiscence, evoking the endless horizons and carefree attitude of growing up, and its Marshfield echoes are certainly there, if undefined. "Along the Wall" is a warm, poignant memoir of a departed friend, with the heart-tugging image of the survivor musing that they never wrote their names together on a wall they often passed.

"I think you have an unlimited amount of songwriting material right under your nose, from your own experience," Connolly said. "There is a certain thread between 'Little Town' and 'Mystery Water,' and the images are very similar in my head, about growing up. I just visited my brother in California, and he knew immediately 'the bumpy road' was at the end of our street - my kids are singing it now. I remember reading a Van Morrison interview, where he was talking about his 'Astral Weeks' album, and how he saw childhood as a series of small epiphanies. I think that is true, but they all sit in your head in different ways."

"'Castle Island' sounds like a gangster-type tale," Connolly added, "but it's really about a guy trying to find work. It's a view of my dad, returning as a Marine who'd fought in Korea, and what he had to deal with to find work, and eventually enable us to get out of Dorchester and down to Marshfield. I think it deals with the fact that there are different ways of being a hero."

Three of the songs on Connolly's album deal with relationships, but in the measured, mature way as you'd expect of a fortysomething songsmith.

"Do Me" is a passionate plea to take a chance on something new, just to take a step forward. "When You Fall in Love" ends that phrase with witty, genuine and wise reflections on the subject - "feeling like a goosebump, acting like a fool," is one of the more humorous sequences, before the provocative ending "When you Fall in Love, you get discovered."

"Right Through Me" might be the most visceral rocker on this acoustic album, a celebration of the kind of incandescent, electrifying love that sustains you through everything; "Life is a little dance/ We got a perfect chance/ You are the one showing it to me."

And like Springsteen, Mellencamp, Alvin and Earle, the best part of Connolly's music is that he makes you feel like such things are still possible.

Connolly's album is available at kevinconnolly.com. Digital downloads are available on iTunes.

HERE AND THERE: This Sunday afternoon the Boston Blues Society hosts a fund-raiser at Club 58 in Quincy for 2005 Battle of the Boston Blues Band winners The Chris Fitz Band to

finance their trip to the nationals in Memphis in January. Appearing will be The Chris Fitz Band, Mission of Blues, Racky Thomas and Rick Russell, among others, and the 4 p.m. show comes with just a \$10 ticket.

The Grace Potter and the Nocturnals show was nearly sold out at The Narrows Center last Saturday, and the talented Vermont blues-rocker had some news: her band will be doing its first headlining gig at Boston's Paradise Rock Club on Feb. 18. They're also opening for Assembly of Dust on Dec. 30 at the 'Dise.

Jay Miller can be reached at kingmuskrat@yahoo.com.

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