

Profile: Gabriel Kelley

'If you want something done right, do it yourself.' That line of advice tends to get stated with a lot more frequency than it's actually followed. In Gabriel Kelley's case, though, it's something he's never needed to think about: It's the way he's always done things.

The talented 27-year-old raised most of the funds for his debut album with a Kickstarter campaign, but his manner of conducting his life and music runs deeper. The saga of how **IT DON'T COME EASY** came to be is one of steadfast determination and self-sufficiency and a commitment to doing the right thing—often against challenging odds. And, as Kelley himself notes, there's a corollary: Even when the creative process isn't a walk in the park, it's worth the effort when the work is honest.

And it is. **IT DON'T COME EASY** is an uncompromising and heartfelt debut that, if it requires a category, would fit comfortably under "singer-songwriter." In the best sense of that tradition, it doesn't trifle with extraneous anything: no wasted lines or unnecessary instrumental flourishes, just a communal effort from Kelley and his fellow musicians to, as he puts it, "serve the songs."

The album was a long time coming—Kelley reckons "I waited six years to make my first album"—largely because its ten songs express a pretty expansive range of life experience. That includes a rural, working-class boyhood in Georgia, a total-immersion living-abroad adolescence and an early adulthood spent—and subsequently walked away from—as a professional songwriter on Nashville's Music Row.

"The first music I remember," says the affable Kelley, "is what my folks played at home: Neil Young, John Prine, Cat Stevens, even early Santana and Leon Russell. I soaked all that up. And my folks were members of a community about 20 miles north of Athens, where people played old-time, pre-bluegrass music. I learned to play guitar at these pickings, in a big circle around a fire." (The man who taught Kelley to play, Pat Shields, wrote the powerful lament "These Old Green Hills" on **IT DON'T COME EASY**.)

"I literally grew up in a log cabin," says Kelley, who chopped wood to keep the house warm in winter. "We lived off the land, raised our own food, my folks were vegetarians. Man, I didn't taste refined sugar till I was like 13 or 14." He also recalls performing at open-mic nights in Athens, palling around with the Widespread Panic crew and attending a rural school that taught "the poorest white kids and the poorest black kids in Madison County."

At 16, Kelley got the chance to study in Sweden. "It was straight-up immersion," he says, in the language and culture of a strange land, which didn't come easy: "There was a lot of solitude and isolation." There was also an inspiring music teacher, in whose class Kelley's future path became clear: "I thought, 'OK, this is it. Music's what I'm gonna do with my life.'" Returning to Georgia, Kelley completed his senior year, then did a few months at the University of Georgia before lighting out, once again, on his own.

He bought a Chevy Astro van, built a bed frame in the back and took off across the country, trading his music for a place to stay ("If I had money to get to the next town, I'd put it in the gas tank; if I didn't, I'd stay in the town until I did"). After two years of vagabonding, he returned to Athens and formed a band. Kelley's material got around, and before long he was signed as a staff writer for a Nashville country music publishing company.

That opportunity, which might have appeared golden to other young musicians, didn't suit Kelley's style. "Nashville was kinda like cowboy hats and belt buckles, and I was more the long-haired granola kid," he says. "The routine was 'OK, it's 10:30: Let's grab some coffee and go into a room with somebody I've never met and write a song.'" The experience, though, pointed directly toward **IT DON'T COME EASY**.

"It got to the point where I couldn't sleep at night," says Kelley. "If I had to write a song called 'Trick My Tractor' that's an R&B/country mash-up because that's the demographic that's happening now, I was gonna kill myself. I would come off a session, go home and write another song on my own, just to feel good about myself." Kelley finally decided to chuck it all. He walked out of the publishing gig and traveled to Guatemala, where he helped raise funds and created a music education program for orphans, before returning to the States. In short order, he traded his suburban digs for a 1977 Dodge Mobile Traveler RV ("It had the orange shag and wood paneling everywhere, man!") and sat down to write. "Once I left publishing," he explains, "my life went from comfort in the physical and material to just bare-bones. My food and nourishment became what I was creating in this music. In a way, I'd jumped off a cliff; my overhead for a month was probably 50 bucks, but it bought me freedom."

Woodshedding, Kelley began, as he says, "digging in": writing, refining and shaping songs from the considerable experience he'd amassed in his 20-something years. And, miraculously, the musicians who would help him put it all into the grooves came forward, three generations of them. They include engineer/producer Neal Cappellino, whose credits include a Grammy® for engineering on Alison Krauss' 2011 album *Paper Airplane* and work with Joan Osborne and Del McCoury; legendary Memphis picker Reggie Young (Elvis, Dusty Springfield); background vocalist Bekka Bramlett (Joe Cocker, Fleetwood Mac); Brad Pemberton (The Cardinals, Brendan Benson); Jon Graboff (The Cardinals, Noel Gallagher); Dave Jacques (John Prine, Emmylou Harris) and fellow recording artist Gabe Dixon (Paul McCartney, Supertramp). Kelley supplies guitar and harmonica.

"We tracked all the songs in about four or five days," recalls Kelley, "all together in a room. At most, we did five takes of a song, sometimes two." Over the next several months, he and Cappellino brought in select musicians to add strings and various other instrumentation to augment and support the basic tracks captured live in the studio on such cuts as "How Come," the stark ballad "When Is Enough," the genuinely funky "Only Thing to Do" and the slightly Van Morrison-ish "Faith."

IT DON'T COME EASY has now arrived, and it's an authentic representation—and the logical culmination—of what Gabriel Kelley set out to do, on his own terms. Its organic feel proceeds directly from the autobiographical nature of the songs that comprise it and from Kelley and Cappellino's observation that "There's no point in writing or recording unless you mean what you're saying." Kelley's close-to-the-land Georgia background and affinity for telling it like it is, simply and directly, inform both the music and sentiments throughout, especially on tunes like "See Ya Comin'" and "Goodbye Jesse." The songs are all Kelley's, with the sole exception of "These Old Green Hills": "I was home a couple of years ago," he says, "and Pat [Shields] played it for me, and I said, 'I'm gonna put that on the record.' I never did anyone else's song before, but I did that as kind of a tribute to Pat, because of his influence on me."

Like its dramatic cover (by award-winning designer Buddy Jackson), the album reflects hard work and time well spent. "The whole idea of that one guy plowing that big-ass field," says Kelley, "is about energy and intention and focus. The field is so open, and it's actually yielding something, and there's all this sense of possibility..."

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