

A Conversation with Kevin Welch
by Frank Goodman (11/2007, Puremusic.com)

Kane Welch Kaplin is a folk group made up of two great singer songwriters (Kieran Kane and Kevin Welch), multi-instrumentalist Fats Kaplin, and Kieran's percussionist son, Lucas. When you think about it, it's strange there aren't more folk groups around, when Bluegrass or Old Timey music by necessity spawn seemingly endless ensembles. But in singer songwriter world, it's possible and it's commonsensical to tour solo, or duo. And as a duo is how it began, after the O'Kanes broke up for Kieran and Kevin began using him as a session man. But all that and the further evolution of the lineup and modus operandi of this compelling quartet is detailed in the relaxed and deadpan Oklahoma delivery of Kevin Welch in the conversation to come.

It's a very artistic group, without being consciously so. That is, each of the three seasoned guys have done so many things and been artists already for so long, that a great deal of experienced spontaneity erupts during a KWK show that's not much like the aforementioned acoustic groups at all. It's more about the song, the atmosphere, and the chemistry, and the room. It's more vibe-y. And as Kevin points out, they don't talk about it, not at all.

I don't know much about Lucas, except that what he adds as the youngest member of the group musically is very tasteful, and crucial. The other three are well known to me as a longtime Nashvillian, and are, to a man, deep as a well. Kieran was very successful with the O'Kanes, and is a visceral force of nature, evidenced of late also in his impressive paintings, several of which are featured on the covers of KWK releases, including the most recent. I always considered Kevin Welch among Nashville's finest writers, with a very strong writing "voice," on top of being a superlative performer. And Fats' recording credits and touring schedule tells all that need be told about his distinguished career; you must check out his latest CD, *The Fatman Cometh*, reviewed in these pages.

You'll want to pick up the new CD after you check out the clips on the Listen page. We caught up with Kevin Welch recently in Canada, and he talked with us as they were packing the cars for the next show.

Puremusic: How are you, buddy?

Kevin Welch: Well, I'm okay. I'm up in a small town in B.C. right now with the boys.

PM: Man, that's a place I'd like to be. Where are you gigging up there in B.C.?

KW: A little town called Penticton, it's a resort area.

PM: How many dates are you guys playing up there?

KW: Half a dozen or so, I guess.

PM: Right.

KW: We're headed to Toronto--or, no, I think we go somewhere else and then we're headed to Toronto, and then headed home.

PM: Yeah, my other two interviews are in Toronto today, two brothers, Dallas and Travis Good in a band called The Sadies. Ever hear of them?

KW: I believe I have, yes.

PM: Yeah, that's an awfully good band, there. Boy, I envy you. I'd love to be riding across Canada today. What's the weather like where you are on this nearly autumn day?

KW: Well, I'm standing outside in a t-shirt and I'm freezing, so I'm getting ready to go back in.

PM: I don't know the details on the origin of the Kane Welch Kaplin outfit; the when, why, and how. How did that particular construct of talented cats come together, and why?

KW: We've been playing together off and on for years, since back in the beginning of the Dead Reckoning days and before. After the O'Kanes broke up, I asked Kieran if he would like to come play on my second record from Warner Brothers. And he brought so much in. I mean, he just affected the groove in such a good way that it got so I didn't like to play without him.

PM: Wow.

KW: And somewhere along in there I saw Fats Kaplin, me and Mike Henderson standing next to each other, watching the Tom Russell band play on stage in Switzerland up in the Alps. And Henderson goes, "Hey, you know who that is up there playing the pedal steel?" I said, "No." He said, "That's Fats Kaplin." And I said, "Well, that's the guy we need in our band." He's up there playing pedal steel, and accordion, and fiddle.

PM: Every damn thing.

KW: And then Henderson says, "Fats Kaplin would never play with us."

[laughter]

PM: Oh, that's funny.

KW: Anyway, a year or two later or something, Tom's band broke up and, well, we heard that Fats was possibly available. I invited him to come down to check out Nashville. He was living in Manhattan.

PM: Oh, he was still in the City, then.

KW: Yeah. So he did, man. He got a toothbrush and a couple instruments, and that was about it, and came on down. And ever since then Fats has been playing with all kinds of people. I mean, you should actually check out his gigography.

PM: Oh, yeah. I mean, we reviewed his last solo record, which we thought was spectacular.

KW: So Kieran and I, over time, I mean, we were doing the Dead Reckoning Night of Reckoning tours with Henderson and Tammy Rogers, and Harry Stinson, and that whole bunch. And after a while we kind of hung that up. And Kieran and I were invited to go down to Australia. Can you hear me okay, Frank?

PM: Yeah, I hear you good.

KW: I'm talking to over my computer and I'm getting dressed as we talk. We were invited to go down to Australia just to do basically a little two-man song swap. And it was a really, really casual approach to how to put on a show, if you will.

PM: Sure.

KW: And after about maybe the fourth or fifth show, I believe, there was a radio station that wanted to record us to broadcast it later. And we said, yeah, that they could do that as long as we owned the master. And later on we decided to put that out as a live record. And it turned out that that gig was voted Gig of the Year by--there was a roots magazine down there, I can't recall right now what it was called.

PM: And what's that record called?

KW: It's called *11/12/13*, because it was recorded on November 12th and 13. So the name of the record is *11/12/13*. We got to where we would go down to Australia every year. We did that for a number of years. And finally we got our numbers up to the point where we could afford to invite Fats to go with us. And as we like to say, me and Kieran had been denying for many, many years that we were a duo. And then we began denying that we were a trio. We went in and made the record *You Can't Save Everybody*, and really dug that whole recording process. It was very effortless. Then we went in and made another record a couple years later called *Lost John Dean*. We were knocking these records out in two days and then mixing it on the third day.

PM: Really?

KW: So then we discovered that Kieran's son Lucas was playing the drums. We didn't even know. And we invited him to come out and play some shows with us. And right off the bat it was a lot better. We really liked it a lot, and realized that was that. We didn't really want to be playing any shows without him, either. So we then went in the studio here not long ago and made the record *Kane Welch Kaplin*. And we called it *Kane Welch Kaplin* because we're kind of trying to drive home the point that it's not just a couple of songwriters and their multi-instrumentalist buddy, it's actually a band. So anyway, that's what we've been doing, and that's why.

PM: If I may be so bold, the dynamic of the group seems to allow, or even encourage, a kind of a mystical side of the principals to emerge. Even "I Wish I Had That Mandolin," that song could have seen a much more straight ahead approach in a lot of groups, or in a different time. But how it starts with that cymbal swell setting the atmosphere, it's really trippy, how it lends meaning to you singing about your little voice talking and so forth. It's a very atmospheric group for what you could call a folk group. It's got a lot more happening in terms of ambience.

KW: Yeah, it does. I can't say that that's necessarily deliberate. We don't really talk about stuff. We don't really discuss very much what anybody ought to do, really. There's no preproduction. Most of the songs when we record them we haven't learned them yet. There's a couple of things on this record that we had been fooling with on the road. And I'm not even saying that this is the right thing to do. I'm just saying it is what we do. We just try to keep our brains out of it.

PM: Right. Yeah, it's the wrong tool for the job.

KW: Well, it really is. It really is. So you do hear a lot of different influences kind of showing up. Kieran's approach to the banjo has got a whole lot more to do with Bo Diddley than it does Earl Scruggs, for instance.

PM: [laughs] Or Doc Boggs, right.

KW: Yeah.

PM: That's funny.

KW: And Fats, well...

PM: Oh, yeah, Fats, if anything leans toward the mystical side or the eastern side, he'll pull out a sitar or an oud, or whatever.

KW: Yeah. That's true.

PM: In fact, I was really tickled when I saw the band at the Basement some months ago and he had an oud with him.

KW: Right.

PM: Wow, I mean, that's just one of my favorite instruments in the world, and he was playing the living hell out of it.

KW: Yeah, I'd have to say, I mean, he had only just had gotten that thing. It seems like it was only a couple weeks before we made the *You Can't Save Everybody* record. He hadn't had it very long at all. And he pulls it out and we start recording a song called "Mr. Bones." And the next thing I knew he was just--like you said, I mean, he was just playing the dog shit out of that thing.

PM: [laughs] He's just like that. And he's a real prince; very egoless for a guy who can play so many things.

KW: Yeah. When we all play together, there are a lot of musical conversations going on. Like you'll hear when somebody will almost suggest something, and you answer back. And it allows us to take these things off into different directions on different nights. Certain songs in particular are sort of designed to just let us experiment. Some of the arrangements we'll pretty much stick to, and just try to tighten them down through playing and so forth. But other songs are really there for us to be able to just take off. And we'll change time signatures, or change grooves, and change tempos. The only thing we don't change, we never change keys when we're playing. But other than that, everything else is pretty much up for grabs.

PM: I do like that.

I was going to ask this of whomever I got on the mic, and I'm tickled that it's you because I wanted to know it about you. What kind of a home and a family did you grow up in, and when did music first take a hold of you in a way that would change your life?

KW: Well, I was raised in a traveling family. The first seven years of my life, we just stayed out pretty much on the road. We estimated something over 70 different places that we lived by the time I was seven.

PM: Holy jeez.

KW: But right toward the end of that--I think at the time we were in Pennsylvania, my mom brought home an Elvis Presley record, and that was it for me. I decided right then I was going to be a musician.

PM: Wow.

KW: But I was the only musician in the family. We ended up in Oklahoma where I discovered Woody Guthrie, who grew up right down the road from where we were. And that combined with all I wanted to do was play music, and really, really related to the Guthrie stuff because--I don't know, just kind of my formative years were spent on the move like that. I think I read Jack Kerouac and Woody Guthrie the same summer.

PM: What a beautiful summer.

KW: Yeah. So when I was about 17, I got back on the road again with a bluegrass band, and eventually ended up in Nashville with a writing gig. Kieran and I moved to Nashville virtually the same time.

PM: What year was that?

KW: It would have been...I want to say '78. So we were both young writers at Tree. And I had the benefit of all the great writers that were hanging out in that building through those years. It was really a songwriting school to go to.

PM: Unbelievable.

KW: There was a lot of good songwriting going on in those days up and down Music Row.

PM: Yeah, I certainly remember when I first got to town in '89, that you were one of my favorite songwriters on the scene, and made a big impression on me.

KW: Thanks, Frank.

PM: Absolutely.

You mentioned Lucas coming into the fold as a drummer. What's it like having another generation on the road?

KW: Well, it's actually really good because Lucas is a really good photographer, for one thing. And he's got a really good eye. He's been designing these little films, these little road snippets. He just now started putting those up online. It's really, for me, very entertaining. Plus he's kind of the go-to guy whenever the three old guys can't figure out where we are or something, we go, "Lucas?" and he goes, "Yeah, you missed the exit back there," or whatever.

PM: [laughs]

KW: It's been really, really good having him out here with us.

PM: Yeah, I'd imagine that it would be a huge influence of some type or another, and yeah, it sounds like he's a hell of a guy on the road.

KW: Yeah.

PM: What about music on the road? Everybody listening to iPods? Or do people tend to listen to what's on the system in the van?

KW: I almost never listen to music.

PM: Not at all.

KW: Almost not at all, unless it's Chet Baker or--I've been listening to a lot of Hoagy Carmichael. But basically I never listen to music. And it's pretty much the same for Kieran or Fats. We were on some radio station someplace recently and they asked us what we were listening to, and when we told them, it was like utterly bizarre. I think I said, "Oh, I'm listening to Hoagy Carmichael." And Kieran I think was listening to Japanese flute music, and Fats was listening to God knows what, some kind of gypsy polka stuff from Poland or something. But Lucas does listen to--he keeps his iPod on. And I can't even tell you what he's listening to.

PM: Right, some youngin' stuff.

KW: Uh-huh.

PM: Yeah, that's how it gets, a lot of really great musicians just prefer not to listen to music when they're not making music, just prefer the silence, or prefer something offbeat, like Chet Baker or something like that.

KW: Yeah.

PM: It makes sense to me.

What about any books getting passed around the crowd?

KW: Yeah, in fact, that's a big deal. We do a lot of that. I'm reading this John Steinbeck, *A Russian Journal*. It's a piece of journalistic stuff that he wrote during a trip to Russia after the Cold War began, after the end of World War II.

PM: Right.

KW: That's a really interesting thing. I can't remember right now what the boys are reading. I think Fats is reading something about poker.

[laughter]

KW: It gets to where--like right now I've probably got eight books in my suitcase, and it's really bad. I have to forcefully make myself not go into used bookstores, because of weight.

PM: It's a killer.

KW: You've got to keep the weight down when you're traveling. We just got back from Australia, and I did the same thing. I had a stack of hard cover books on my bedside every night.

PM: Yeah, you'd think by now you'd learn, but no, it's one of those things you get addicted to.

KW: I found a bunch of Graham Greene--well, two or three Graham Greene books that I didn't own, I've got those in my suitcase now.

PM: Are those Kieran's paintings on the front and the back of the record?

KW: They sure are.

PM: Holy shit, are they good.

KW: Yeah. He's got a really fantastic style, really striking. And it was never planned, like, we'll make these records and Kieran will do the covers, just the first record, *You Can't Save Everybody*, we noticed that one of the paintings that he had would simply make a good cover for this, it seemed to go with it. And then exactly in the same kind of casual sense, the second record, the same thing happened. The third record we weren't necessarily going to put one of Kieran's paintings on there, and he had that fat lady, and I just lobbied really, really hard for that.

PM: That's a hell of a painting.

KW: Yeah, I thought this would be a really cool cover. And they resisted. I mean, I had to really kind of stay on task.

PM: Who did? The label resisted, or the guys?

KW: The guys. But anyway, I'm really glad that we did. I think it's a gorgeous cover. And anyway, Kieran's painting, he's got a website. I think it's just called KieranKane.org, where people can go and see his stuff. [<http://www.kierankane.org>]

PM: So does he bring any artwork or print on the road to sell at gigs?

KW: No. Probably should.

PM: He should at least have prints.

KW: That would require being organized.

PM: Yeah, right, and that's out of the question.

KW: Yeah.

PM: We don't go in for that kind of thing.

KW: We need a manager or managers desperately.

PM: Along with the paintings, there was a superior design going on with this record. Tracy Walner, who is that? She's got it going on.

KW: She's a woman who had done a CD package for us at Dead Reckoning. I want to say it was *Shadows on the Ground*. When we were talking about a designer for this one, she came up. I had never personally worked with her before. Kieran had had a really good experience with her, because *Shadows on the Ground* was one of Kieran's records, a great record. So sure enough, we laid it on her, and she just knocked that out. And she's just fantastic. I really would love to work with her some more.

PM: Yeah, she did a beautiful job there.

KW: Yeah.

PM: I like that song "Dark Boogie No. 7" on this new record, and how it worked out. Did the words get written for the track, or did the music get written to the poem?

KW: I had those lyrics around for a while, and had been looking for some kind of a groove to just chant them, just recite them. And I pulled it out and showed it to the guys. And Fatty had that really odd instrumental written. And so they started playing it, and I just started saying the words. And we decided that it made sense. It actually turned out to be a really good live piece. I didn't think it would at all. But it's gotten to where--I mean, we even close some shows with it now.

PM: Wow.

KW: It's a bit more intense when we do it live than when we recorded it. One of the reasons for that, with all the drums going on, it's hard for me on a live stage to quietly say those things. So I tend to shout it a lot more, and it just kind of ratcheted up the intensity. So yeah, it's an interesting piece of business. I never really expect people to like it, but we keep getting these really good reactions.

PM: Yeah, so there's probably going to be more of that going on.

KW: Oh, not necessarily.

PM: [laughs] Yeah, that would be planning things out, and that's just not the way it happens.

KW: Exactly. Hey, Frank, I'm kind of getting the "let's get the hell out of here" look from the boys.

PM: Yeah, absolutely. I was just about to wind up, myself. It's a pleasure to talk to you, Kevin, as always. And have a good time up there in Canada, and I'll see when you get back to town.

KW: Thanks a million, Frank. See you soon.