

GORDON SMITH interview (21.11.07)



Once described by John Peel as “the foremost white blues guitarist in the world”, Gordon Smith released his debut solo album through Mike Vernon’s Blue Horizon label in 1968. He joined Kevin Coyne’s band in 1973 and added his distinctive slide style to the albums *Marjory Razorblade*, *Blame It On The Night* and *Matching Head And Feet*, all released on Virgin. A couple of solo albums followed in the late 70s before Gordon went into semi-retirement in the early 80s. His most recent album is *Out Of A Bottleneck*, released by Master Mix in 2000. Reportedly a man of few words, Gordon talks here about his blues influences and his work with Kevin Coyne.

Where were you born?

“I was born in South Shields in 1949. Lived there till I was seventeen. Came to London – and I’ve been here ever since.”

Were you playing music up there before you came to London?

“Yes. I was just getting into blues music.”

Can you remember, when you were a kid, what were the first records you were listening to?

“It was just the usual blues singers like Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf. Blues volume 1, volume 2, all the blues guys. And I remember having some EPs Alexis Korner had brought

out with old country blues people like Furry Lewis. That's when I got into slide guitar, through Furry Lewis. I'd say that's what started me off."

What about the pop music of the time? Did that interest you?

"Well, yeah, I was into that as well, like everybody else. I was always into music since I was a kid. I was really into Elvis and Little Richard when I was five years old. (Laughs). Yeah, all them people. All the old rock'n'rollers. Jerry Lee Lewis."

I read somewhere, when you came down to London in 1966, you were busking...

"...in Portobello Road, where we are right now." (Laughs).

And is it true some blues fans discovered you?

"It's true!"

They suggested you play at the Blue Horizon Club?

"In Battersea, yes! The Nags Head, it was called."

And you went along that same evening – is that right?

"The next day, I think it was. I played in the club supporting some band – I can't remember which one. I did the interval spot. It was Mike Vernon's club."

And the very next day, or very soon, you were recording at the CBS studios?

"Yes! It all happened very quickly. CBS studios, Bond Street."



This sounds like a no-fuss way to becoming successful...

“Yes! I suppose I got lucky in a way.”

I haven't heard your first solo album, Long Overdue. It's one of those records you never seem to find in secondhand shops. I guess the people who have it want to cling on to it, they treasure it.

“Apparently it's worth about a hundred quid now! It was supposed to be put out on CD last year but it's been put on hold I think.”

The guys who played on that record... well, it was basically Fleetwood Mac.

“Yes!”

I think they were already quite well known in London at that time, certainly in London, as a blues band.

“Yeah, as a blues band. They weren't really famous then. They were just becoming famous at the time”

Were they acting as a session band as well?

“Well, they were session men to me, because they were all involved in Blue Horizon, and they happened to be around so Mike Vernon got them together with me.”

Was that just a one-off?

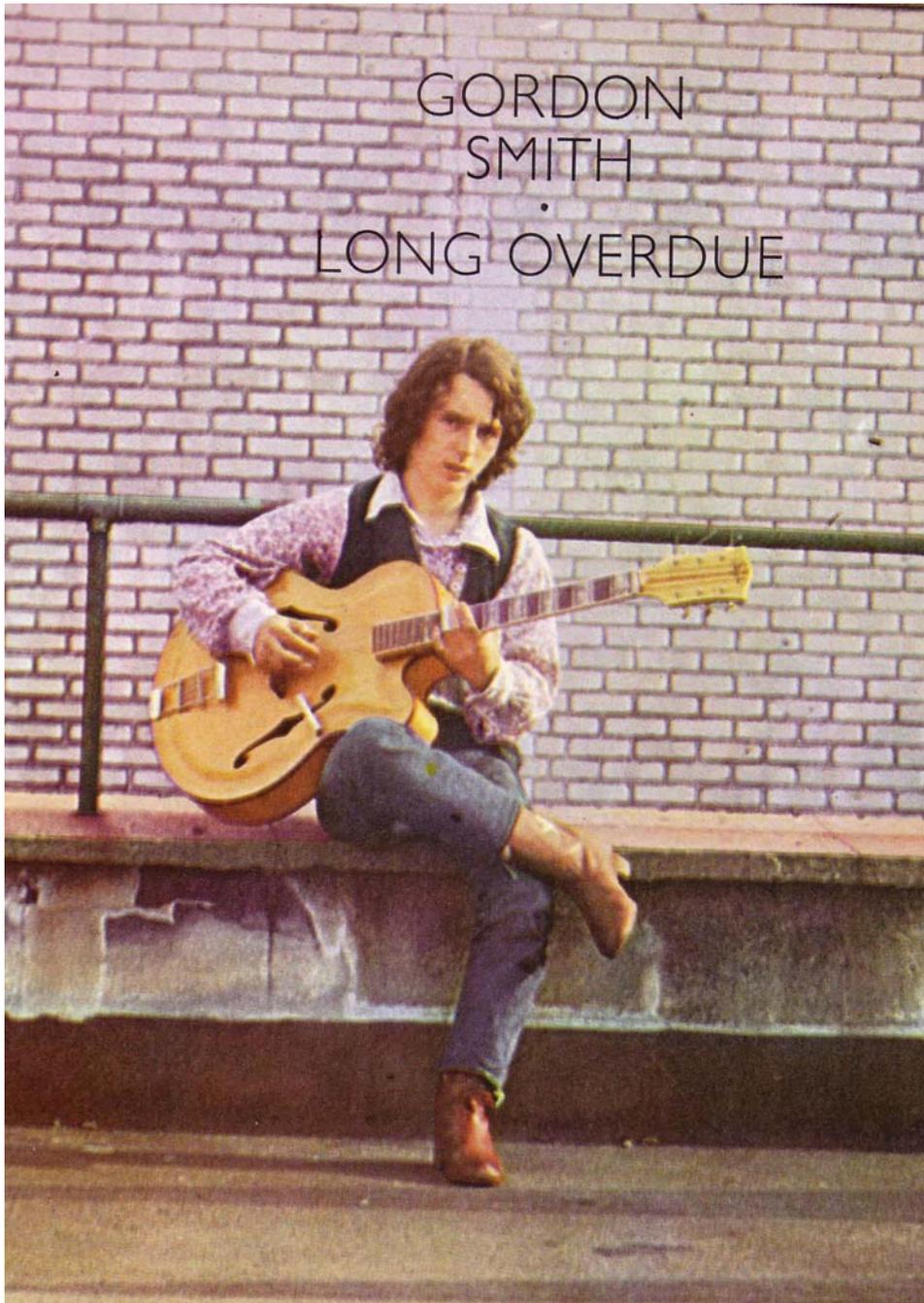
“Well, there's only two tracks with Mick Fleetwood and John McVie, and there's one track with Peter Green on harmonica. Most of it's just me on my own.”

But what a start to your career! When you look back at that now, doesn't it sound incredible?

“Well, yeah! I was only 19 years old. Like I said, I got lucky. I got gigs through being with Blue Horizon. They used to send me all over England. Not so much London. All over England - and Scotland.”

Was the blues scene more focused on London or did you find, when you travelled to cities further away, they were also into it?

“No, it was all over the place. Everyone was into it at the time. All big cities had local bands who everybody followed. Like in Newcastle it used to be, obviously, The Animals. But that was just a little bit before the blues thing. That was early 60s.”



When did you first meet Kevin Coyne?

“I was working in a Virgin record shop in Notting Hill Gate. I’m not sure exactly how we got together. It might have been through my girlfriend at the time, Sandy. Kevin had heard of me, obviously, through my Blue Horizon stuff.”

Siren did actually make a demo for Blue Horizon before signing with Dandelion Records.

“Kevin told me that, yeah.”

I imagine when he was about to start work on Marjory Razorblade, he looking for a guitarist who played slide and thought of you.

“Well, we met, we hit it off. We became good friends. And, at the time, I was having trouble with my girlfriend. As you do. I moved in with Kevin in his house in Clapham.”

He was living with Lesley at the time...

“With Lesley, yes! It was a big flat in Clapham and they gave me a room. I took my trunk, my poccession, to his place. I didn't really stay there very long. I used to stay there on odd days. I was going back and forwards to my girlfriend's, and going back to Kevin's place. Most of the time I was drinking a lot and doing other things...”

As Kevin was as well, I presume...

(Laughs) “Yeah! I remember playing music in Kevin's flat, just the two of us with acoustic guitars. That's how we got together.”

And obviously you both shared a great love of the blues and rock'n'roll music...

“Blues, yes! Kevin loved the blues!”

What do you remember about the sessions for Marjory Razorblade?

“It was good, yeah! I enjoyed them.”

Some took place at the Manor...

“Yeah, the first lot was at the Manor, and we went down to Worthing, to a studio down there. And also there was another one in Chipping Norton which, coincidentally, was something to do with Blue Horizon. They were involved with that studio when we did the last session with Jean Roussel on the keyboards.”

Kevin said he was surprised people really cottoned on to the fact that what you guys were doing was “genuine white blues”. Which it was!

“Yeah!”

Particularly the guitar style...

“Yeah, Kevin always said I was the blues part of the band. Kevin obviously wrote all tthe songs, or most of them, so we just had to put our stamp on it. It was a great little band! It used to rock!”

Did you play live when recording?

“Yes, we would have done it live. I done a few overdubs but most of it was live. None of this rubbish about taking six months to do an album. We done it in a week or something like that.”

And it was a double album! Such a lot of material!

“Well, that came from Kevin, yeah! He was a talented guy, Kevin, he was a one-off!”

What did you guys think of songs like House On The Hill? Did you ever think this will never work, or that it was too off-beat?

“No, I didn’t think anything like that. We just played the music as it was - live.”

About Marjory Razorblade, Kevin said: “It was something rather individualistic but using the blues poetic lyric form.”

“Well, that comes from Kevin, ’cause he was into blues as well, apart from other things.”

And, in a way, blues singers wrote about what was directly on their doorstep – their life and what was around them. Kevin was really doing the same...

“Yeah!”

His Derby influences, social work experiences, and also that music hall element he’d slip into it...

“Yeah, he was amazing! Kevin was unique! He used to have me in stitches when we were talking together. The stories he used to tell me... bloody hell!” (Laughs)

After Marjory Razorblade came Blame It On The Night. Kevin said it’s “as good as Marjory Razorblade, if not better”. For me, it’s a darker album in a way.

“It was a guy called Fi Trench. He was the arranger on that one. Ruan O’Lochlainn, he came in. He played loads of different instruments, he played everything. He’s dead now! They’re all dying!”

The album opens with River Of Sin and that fabulous cackle of laughter from Kevin, very similar to Johnny Rotten a few years later on Anarchy In The UK. Johnny Rotten was a fan of Kevin’s, I believe. It’s almost as if Kevin was a punk rocker before punk rock started.

“Yes, I’ve heard people say that! He was the original punk rocker!”

What about songs like Witch on side 2...

“Very dark!”

And a little bit scary...

“Yes!”

It’s gone beyond blues by this stage...

“Yeah! How would you describe that? I dunno. He had a dark side to him...”

But there’s also a lot of humour in it as well...

“Oh, Yeah!”

Were they boozy sessions?

“Oh yes, heavy drinkers, all of us! Apart from Chili (Charles).”

And quick to record, like Marjory?

“Yeah. I think it was all done at the Manor.”

Going on to Matching Head And Feet...

“That’s when we brought in Andy Summers (guitar) and Archie Legget (bass). Before that we had a few different drummers after Chili. It’s a long time ago, I can’t remember who was who.”

When Andy Summers joined the band, this presumably changed the chemistry of the band.

“Yeah. I think the idea was from Virgin. They were trying to make them into a pop star thing, make them more commercial.”

Kevin said, and I quote: “That band didn’t lack for egos”. Is that true?

“Oh yeah, I would think so. A lot of egos flying around, yeah!”

How did that influence the recording?

“There was a lot of tension at the time.”

Spurred on from the drinking?

“Yeah! Lots of drinking...”

One of the stand-out tracks on Matching has to be Turpentine. Again, it’s almost punk rock before punk rock started. Was that a conscious move from Kevin to go for a more aggressive sound or did it come from the band?

“Yeah, I think the band as well. There was a lot of tension going around.”

Was there any in-band fighting going on?

“Not really fighting... it was just like... atmosphere. The band was different ‘cause they just kept me on – and Tim (Penn). Got rid of the old band. Got Andy Summers in, and Archie Legget, the drummer (Peter Woolf). So, yeah, it was different. I don’t know how to explain it. Different musicians...”

The album also features Saviour, another Coyne classic. During the recording of that track, Kevin is quoted as saying: “My God! What kind of monster have we given birth to?” It’s almost as if he was aware he’d crossed a line. It was a bigger, fiercer sound than before. Can you remember that session?

“Yeah, well, that was my riff. That was me trying to do a Fred McDowell sort of thing on the slide guitar. I’d met Fred McDowell and loved his music. That’s where that riff came from.”

Saviour is a co-written (Coyne/Legget/Smith)...

“It was just done on the spot. That’s how Kevin used to do it. He used to come out with these words and we used to play around them.”

Many people say Kevin never used to turn up to the studio with songs already written. Was it the same back then?

“Yeah! He never used to have anything written down.”

Incredible!

“Yes, he was great! That’s the way it should be done.”

There’s a lot of spontaneity, like at the concerts...

“Everything was different every time, yeah.”

When you were on stage with Kevin, did you ever feel this could all collapse at any moment?

“Oh Yeah! (Laughs) It did collapse a few times! That’s from over-indulgence. I remember one time, we did this tour of Spain with a new drummer. I can’t remember his name... And just before we went on stage, in the dressing room, he drank a whole bottle of brandy. In one go! A big bottle! Just one go! And then we went on stage and he just collapsed at these drums. (Laughs) And we’re getting these cans and all sorts of things thrown at us from the audience. Tin cans flying off my guitar!”

Did you continue to play?

“No, we couldn’t! The crowd didn’t like that. (Laughs) The things that used to go on...”

What was it like being on the road with Kevin? Did you get to know him well, like a friend?

“Oh yes! We were close. `Cause I’m a Northerner – and he was from up North as well, so... yes, we got on”

A similar sense of humour?

“Well, I was pretty quiet, myself.”

Why did you leave Kevin’s band?

“I remember mentioning to Steve Lewis, who was the manager at the time, that I didn’t want to play with Kevin Coyne for the rest of my life. Maybe that was one thing?”

Was this because of your own music?

“Yeah, I wanted to do my own thing anyway. I always did! I think Virgin wanted us to change the whole band around.”



What did you do after Kevin's band?

"I used to have my own band. I used to do the odd gig now and again. No tours or anything until 1979... I did a couple of albums in Italy for the Appaloosa label. I did quite a few gigs in Italy."

And then into the 80s, did you go into semi-retirement?

"Sort of! I was still doing the odd gig now and again. I mean, I could never give up playing guitar. That's my life! I did an album on cassette, it wasn't released on CD. That was just privately done. And I done a CD (Out Of A Bottleneck) at the end of 1999. That was the last one I done."

Are you still gigging now?

"Yeah, I still play now and again. I don't do that many gigs."

You said earlier (before the interview), the last time you saw Kevin was at the 100 Club gig – his last UK appearance...

"Yes! It must have been twenty years since I last saw him!"

Did you get to have a chat with him?

"Yes, in fact he wanted to get back together and play some music together again. I said: "OK, yes!" Well, he was in Germany, I'm in London. And about a week after I saw him, he phoned me up... but I wasn't in. He left a message on the answering machine, saying: "Hello Gordon! It was great seeing you again after all these years..." And that was the last I heard. I heard just after that that he'd died."

How did you feel?

“I was gutted!”

What are your lasting memories of Kevin?

“He was an amazing guy! He was like a comedian as well. He was everything rolled into one. A great songwriter, a great singer, a great character! He could make you laugh. A funny, funny guy! An intelligent guy! I’ll never forget Kevin.”

(This is an edited version of the interview that will be included in the new, updated and expanded edition of Beautiful Extremes: Conversations with Kevin Coyne by Clive Product, due for publication in 2008)



Gordon Smith London November 2007
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