

I think Kevin Abernathy is the best undiscovered singer-songwriter in America.

I'm almost afraid to put that in print. As a guy who has written about music in newspapers and magazines for the past 30 years, I know how I respond when I read a line like that. I normally say "bull" and approach that artist's album with a "prove it" attitude or maybe even toss it aside.

Let me tell you why I say this and why you should listen to Kevin's new album "Some Stories." Kevin's songs are simple. You'll wake up in the morning singing them and thinking about them. He's from the Hank Williams, Merle Haggard, John Prine school: The melodies are strong and uncomplicated and the words stick with you.

The first song of Kevin's that just floored me was "Noticed the Moon." It's sung from the perspective of a guy who "even on the good days was into something bad" gazing up at the night sky while bleeding to death after wrecking his truck. He thinks about his mom, his son, a lifetime of mistakes and how it's taken this moment to slow him down long enough to really look at the world. Everybody knows a guy like that, but most people aren't writing songs about him.

Like a true artist, Kevin pays attention when other people aren't. How many times have you passed a little cross on the side of the road and thought nothing of it. Kevin noticed. And, after listening to his song "Highway Crosses" I never pass one without giving it some thought.

I've seen Kevin perform the song "Funny Ha Ha" in concert several times. Audiences often laugh at the first line: "He was their little crossdresser/their handsome feller/with a Barbie doll." But by the tragic end of the song listeners realize they've gotten something they hadn't expected. They remember a kid like that. Maybe it could've been their son or brother. And what might they have wished they had said or done differently? Kevin's performed it in front of the kind of audiences who are not used to hearing songs that challenge them. But he isn't preaching. He's telling a story and you can take from it what you will.

Not all of his songs are sad. There are plenty of light moments on "Some Stories," including "The Drama House" – a song about being the sole bearer of a Y chromosome in the home he shares with his wife and three daughters, and the bluegrass "Gudger Town," an old man's recounting of his rural small town life. "She Loves Jesus" is a song Kevin's been performing for a decade or more, but never seemed to fit on another project.

Part of Kevin's perspective comes from growing up the small East Tennessee town of Madisonville and dreaming of going off the big city. For a few years, he did. He was a guitar slinger in San Francisco and Nashville before returning to Tennessee to settle in Knoxville. For the past several years Kevin has performed with his trio the Kevin Abernathy Band and delivered his songs with loud electric guitar, drums and bass. On "Some Stories," Kevin enlisted his buddy Sean McCollough of the Lonetones, Greg Horne and some of Knoxville's best musicians to offer a quieter album that lets the lyrics stand out. Leah Gardner, Mic Harrison, Steph Gunnoe, Maria Williams, Steve Corrigan, Jeff "Geezer" Simms and Dave DeWitt all lend a hand. And you can hear Kevin's three daughters adding some sweet background vocals on "Locked Up In The Keys" and "The Drama House."

Audiences who know Kevin are used to him rocking your butt as much as your brain. On "Some Stories" he's going straight for your heart.

I love this album and I think you will, too.

Wayne Bledsoe, music writer for the Knoxville News Sentinel and host of WDVX-FM's "All Over the Road"