

I KNOW WHAT YOU THINK BUT IT'S NOT TRUE

An Interview With George Kinney of The Golden Dawn

In July of 2002, a handful of Texas musicians and enthusiasts put together the first ever Texas Psych Fest, a two-day fund-raising affair inspired and sanctioned by this very periodical that was held on consecutive weekends in both Houston and Austin, featuring much of the best expansive music the state currently has to offer: Charalambides, The Dunlavy (their first ever live performance), ST-37, Primordial Undermind, Crevice, and Linus Pauling Quartet, to name a few. The event's final notes were sounded, however, by a group that had been among the first and truest to strike them, back when many of the festival's co-participants were but the tiny, mewling end results of their parents' drunken and amorous anniversary dinners.

The Golden Dawn is not a name that travels far outside the orbit of the late 1960s Texas rock scene and its undisputed label of record, International Artists; sadly enough, it's a group that has too often received short shrift even within that provincial history. Third generation Austinite George Kinney, the group's singer and primary songwriter, had grown up alongside 13th Floor Elevators singer Roky Erickson; the friendship between the two extended to their bands, both for better and worse. After the success of their debut International Artists album *The Psychedelic Sounds of...* (and the single "You're Gonna

Miss Me," in particular), the Elevators used their influence to help secure a deal between IA and their brethren in The Golden Dawn, resulting in the group's sole release, the 1968 LP *Power Plant*. Though it had been completed for nearly a year, IA delayed the release of *Power Plant* until after the Elevators second full-length, *Easter Everywhere*, had hit shelves, not wanting The Golden Dawn to detract from their flagship act. This relegation to second-class status by the label predictably affected the record's reception, and the close

overshadowed by the reputations of The Elevators, Red Krayola and Bubble Puppy.

Disillusioned with their label and the Austin music scene in general, The Golden Dawn broke up in 1970 and George Kinney left Texas shortly thereafter, only to return for health reasons in 1978. Since then he has maintained a purposely-low profile, performing sporadically and rarely recording. The last few years, however, have seen a comparative burst of output from the man: he recently released the CD *After the*

bullshit").

In the thick of it all Mr. Kinney was kind enough to give up some of his time and explain, for his part, what it all meant. The following interview took place in a back-corner booth at landmark country bar The Broken Spoke in Austin, Texas, early in the evening of August 1, 2002.

So we're five days beyond the first show in, what 30 years?

With The Golden Dawn, yeah.

How do you feel about the first one?

I thought it was good, I thought we did okay. We played some songs I don't think too many people knew about, there were a couple of chord changes where we didn't all end at the same place, shit like that. That's why we're trying to tighten it up for this show tomorrow (in Austin), because all the chord changes are so important. It's that dramatic chord change thing that we do that really helps our overall sound.

What to you defines the "dramatic chord change?"

It's like Rolling Stones stuff, or Beatles stuff,

and some of the Elevators stuff. Chord changes themselves set something, they create a tone, this rhythm that's really where it's all at. Of course there's the bass and drums, the rhythm section; but the chord changes really set the pace for our stuff. Whereas in straight blues, or straight country, or even straight rock and roll, it's basically three-chord stuff that's real... if you can play guitar, you can sit in with



affiliation between the two Austin groups led to the labeling of The Golden Dawn as a lesser, though solid, imitation of the Elevators. That critique has sadly not changed markedly with time; full of top-shelf songwriting ("This Way Please" is one of the finest moments in the IA catalog) and distinct as the label's most traditional Texas-sounding release – unapologetically shitkicking and shuffling — *Power Plant* nonetheless continues to be

Fall, his first available recording since *Power Plant*, and the publication of his first novel, *The Bandit King*, is imminent. And, of course, The Golden Dawn is performing once again, to newly receptive audiences; their Psych Fest sets were met with enthusiasm, and upon hearing that the band had reformed, Billy Gibbons invited the group to open for ZZ Top at an upcoming Austin date (though the whole concert eventually fell apart, thanks to "stupid



anybody, play anywhere and play all the stuff. But with all of my songs it's not really like that. It's almost like that, but there's always a designed chord change for effect, in every one of them, that you have to know or it just doesn't sound good.

How old were you when you began writing songs?

Early teens. I'd been writing poems since long before that, but the first thing that really snapped me to music was being able to write poems to it. That was the thing that really interested me in music at first, because I'd been writing lovelorn poems to girlfriends in the ridiculous hope that somehow that beautiful poem was going to win her heart. Of course it never did, but it helped me anyway.

Did Dylan or someone influence your thinking that you could set poetry to music?

Absolutely. Definitely Dylan. The biggest single influence I ever had. Second would probably be the Rolling Stones, Beatles, and the Elevators. If there had to be an order it'd probably be something like that. But Dylan as a writer just blew me away.

When you say the Elevators had an influence on you, do you mean the whole band or primarily Roky Erickson?

Roky sort of as a persona and a friend, but musically more like Stacy

(Sutherland). In my opinion, Stacy was the musical genius in the Elevators. Roky was a great singer; the things he could do with his voice, he's one of the best singers I've ever heard, as a person I love him dearly, he's my life long friend, I can't say enough good things about him, but a musical genius — that's not a term I would ever consider. But Stacy, yeah.

Did you know Stacy...

Before the Elevators? No, but we became good friends during the times that we shared. But he was way out there musically; he was the best rock and roll guitar player there's ever been. And then Tommy (Hall) certainly influenced my writing; I went in a whole different direction after meeting Tommy. Instead of love poems it was like the troubadours back in the 12th century, the bards that went around the courts singing their songs. They were doing it to avoid persecution, because Christianity was just coming in there and to be a heretic meant to be put to the sword. So in order to keep their pagan religions alive, they had to refer to the other world that you were supposed to try to attain as a woman, so the *she* in the songs was really a spiritual *she*, or a level they were trying to reach spiritually but couldn't say because they'd be persecuted and killed for it. So to escape that they came up with this genre of music, and strangely enough it reappeared in the '60s in America. All of a sudden this whole thing came about where what they were really talking about was some heavy

stuff. Now it's kinda backed away from that, you can't really say 'leave your body behind,' it's not happening right now.

So, if we follow that idea of the masking of messages in the '60s, the typical line on Elevators songs, for example, is that most of the songs are full of drug references, though they seem open enough for interpretation that you could think about them in many different contexts.

Sure, of course.

What do you think of that particular interpretation and, second, in what ways was your songwriting similar and dissimilar?

That's an excellent question, because that's really the essence of so much of it. I've thought about it a lot, and I may not have a good answer but I'll give it a shot. I think that what happened is that anthropologically humans had evolved to a place right before the '60s — and it does go forwards and backwards from there, it's not like there's this time, there's this zone. There's probably a hundred-year grey zone that we don't know about where there were guys like us back in the 18th century. But it really kinda came about in the '60s, and I think the states of mind that are possible for humans to achieve were really hidden after WWII, with the whole military industrial complex and the '50s perfect mother/perfect father-vision world. The same states of mind that acid and psychedelics actually got you in to, that Timothy

Leary began with, the LSD prophets, were all about something that was possible in evolution. You'd take drugs and you'd get real high, you'd see all this stuff and your mind would expand, but somewhere in your mind there'd be this doubt because you knew you'd taken drugs to get there. It took something as heavy as psychedelics to bring people into that potential consciousness, make the neuron connections at the synapses that actually allowed a whole other perspective. But really that was all that it was supposed to do. The stuff itself, the essential levels of being, are, for all practical purposes, probably eternal like most religions claim. It's always there, God's everywhere, whatever, you just don't lift your mind to it. To do that you had to do this thing to yourself, the good ol' Eastern analogy in *The Prophet* that you use a boat to get across a river, but you don't drag a boat across the desert. Once you get there you let the boat go on.

Obviously Hermeticism is a big influence on you you named the band after it but at what point did you start delving into it?

Early on. At 16 or 17-years-old I was reading more or less esoteric things, but not really until I met Tommy did I really snap to what it was really all about, that it was worth devoting a lot of time to understand, that it was a life-long quest.

Are the songs on *Power Plant* the extent of Golden Dawn's material, or were there songs not included on the record?

We wrote the last song in the hotel or something. I think we wrote "Seeing is Believing" as the last song, I think Jimmy and I wrote that in the Western Skies hotel in Houston because we needed another song. No, that was all the material we had at the time, and we never did any cover songs. Actually I take that back — we did do some Dylan songs and Rolling Stones songs.

Was the Dylan song you did the other night ("It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry") one that you used to play?

Yep.

So the record was done in Houston?

Yep, at Andrus Studios. Frank Davis was the engineer.

Was that the first time you'd been in a studio proper?

First time, yeah. We'd done a few things here and there, usual garage band saving up \$100 and then cutting a tape somewhere.

How long did the recording take?

It took a few weeks, going down there, spending 4 or 5 days, then coming back.

What sort of influence did Frank Davis have on the process?

I always sort of thought of him as a hero, I thought he was way ahead of us, a real studio guy. We were just a bunch of kids from South Austin wanting to kick some ass, but he always had good advice, helped us find the sounds we wanted to get. I can't remember more than a general ambience that he contributed to the whole process. He wasn't an authority figure, we all just had a lot of respect for him, he was kind of a legend, having already done some stuff and worked with the Elevators. His reputation preceded him and he treated us real well, was really into my songs.

I've read some interviews with Mayo Thompson in which he's referred to the days when Red Krayola was still with International Artists, and his feeling that the label didn't do anything for them promotion-wise, advertising-wise, etc. How does that compare with your experience with them?

They were horrible. They had the world by the ass. They had the central Texas Liverpool, it's really one of those great historical fuckups. They had the talent, with the Elevators, us, Red Krayola, Lost and Found, Bubble Puppy, everybody, that was the vanguard of Texas music, and they had them all on one label. That part was great, they just did nothing with it. They had no idea what they were doing, Lelan Rogers and Bill Dillard and those guys, they just didn't have a fucking clue, a bunch of fucking idiots. A bunch of lawyers who said "hey, this is the way to make some money, let's get 'em all signed" and then now what do you do? They couldn't

do anything, they didn't have any booking people, they didn't have any promotional facilities, no budget, no nothing, just a bunch of contracts where nobody could do anything else. They wouldn't let us play up here; they tried to sue us for playing gigs in Austin to pay our fucking rent.

You're kidding?!

No, they told us we couldn't play up here without their getting us the gigs, but they wouldn't get any for us.

Did the Elevators have these kinds of problems?

Oh absolutely! They never had any money, they were as broke as we were. They never had anything. I remember two or three times walking around after an Elevators gig with Roky, two or three of us, calling Lelan Rogers and Bill Dillard at their house in the middle of the night and making them get up and give us \$10 so we could go to Lee's Den and get some Chinese food 'cause we were all hungry. And at that time they really were the top band in the country, better than anybody else not by a little bit but by a lot. And we were no slouches either, and we had nothing. So yeah, Mayo's right, I second what he said.

Was IA like this at the time that you signed with them?

No, because I think we were the second band to sign with them, they had the Elevators and that was all we needed to know. We knew the world was gonna be at our feet. It's one of the stupidest — just how naïve kids can be — but it never dawned on me that we weren't going to be as famous as the Beatles. Of course nobody's as famous as the Beatles, but we were good and we were gonna be the Americans to take back over the country from the English groups, because we knew we were that good. Or we thought we were, we knew the Elevators were and we were their protégés. And it just never occurred to us that we'd be mismanaged so atrociously. So it happened to the Elevators, it happened to us, it happened to everybody. All the IA bands never did shit.

And it's really telling that IA is still such a revered label to this day considering they didn't accomplish half, even a quarter

of what they could have.

Living in Houston, everything was right, everything was set for it to be the new centre of music in America. Austin kinda stole that away from it...

So were you not playing (Austin club) Vulcan Gas Company or places like that?

No, honestly — and this is going to piss some people off, but I'm at the point where it really doesn't matter to me — truth is that Austin never gave me the fucking time of day. Houston has always been real kind to me, when we played Love Street or the Catacombs or any of those places, people came out. Austin's always been...we couldn't get booked at the Vulcan Gas Company, and I think it was political. For one thing we were real heavy into our trip, we really did believe that all the stuff and the drugs were for spiritual enlightenment, and nobody really liked that. Austin's real laid back, you're supposed to get married, go fuck your girlfriend and that's it.

But why was it different for the Elevators then?

Well it wasn't too much, but for one thing they were a little bit advanced from us, musically they were probably a notch ahead of us at the time. We learned a lot from 'em and they were really good. It was pretty stiff competition with the Elevators; too bad we weren't from some other town. It was tough being the best band with them around because they'd come out and blow everybody's shit away. So there was that, and then the fact that we were not just a good time, "let's get stoned" band, not that there's anything wrong with that, it just wasn't us. We were warriors, I mean honestly, we put our armour on and went out to do battle with evil forces every time we went on stage.

Musically, since 1970, you haven't had a whole lot of recordings released...

None at all.

...and it seems like you've taken a big step back from making music your primary outlet.

Actually, it's not really like that. I really have continued to write all the time and play, it's just that the

audience is not there for me. The breaking up of the Dawn, having a few other bands but never really getting back in the studio — all that was a big blow to my vanity. I just thought we were so good, the stuff was so good, there was just no market for it. So I spent 20 years basically playing campfire gigs. Still writing songs, still studying the stuff, still singing and doing the thing, there was just no audience.

So you left Austin in the early '70s and went to the West Coast first, and Tennessee after that?

Yeah, I went to the West Coast and had a lot of fun, though the hippie thing kinda got on my nerves. I never was much of a commune guy. I was always independent, hunted and fished by myself, I was just raised that way.

It's interesting that you grew up hunting and fishing since you seemed like such a precocious child.

My dad was an actor and my mom was director of the Austin Civic Theatre, but I grew up hunting and fishing. I was raised with a gun in my hand, blood and guts, fistfights, the total redneck. All of us in the Golden Dawn were. Part of the criteria for being in a band was you had to know how to fight. They hated long hair; the good ol' boys of South Austin would kick your ass.

So then you went to Tennessee. I know Memphis at that time had a pretty wide-open scene as far as what was happening musically...

Yeah, I was never really too in on that but I was definitely into the Nashville stuff. I was lucky. I was going to Nashville, and my car broke down in a little town on I-40. While I was waiting for my car to get fixed I bought a house, so I just stayed and never came back. And in the little town where I broke down and bought the house happened to live one of Johnny Cash's most prolific songwriters, Vince Matthews. He and I hit it off like that (snap). He didn't have anything to do all day but stay in the little town square and drink beer and wait for his royalty cheques to come in, and he needed a drinking buddy and there I was. So we hung out and he introduced me to everybody in Nashville. I did a show with Johnny Cash, I was on my

way to fame and fortune there.

Was that your goal when you went in the first place?

I wanted to be a country star, then I got up there and to really do it was gonna be too much trouble. I just couldn't make myself go into town enough, even there I wanted to stay home. I've always been a recluse.

So you've finally released a new CD, *Golden Dawn* is playing shows again; what's different now?

Well, right now it's different with *The Golden Dawn* because Eric Arn (Texas Psych Fest co-promoter) called me up with this idea and asked if we'd be interested, and I said yeah it sounds cool, I don't know if I can get the guys all up for it or who can do it, but yeah. We only stopped because nobody gave a shit, so if somebody gives a shit then hell yeah, we'll get back in.

Are the motivations and objectives the same?

It's all exactly the same. It's almost like reading a newspaper, you change the dates and it's the same story, but the approach is a little bit different. My approach has certainly changed, I've matured a lot, I don't take acid anymore, I've changed my lifestyle a lot. A lot of things have changed but as far as the music and the message, really no. The cutting edge never changes. Sometimes society gathers on that edge, and they were doing that in the '60s, especially with the Elevators. There were Elevator concerts where everybody was tuned in, it wasn't Tommy Hall, it wasn't Roky, it was everybody that was there. They'd come to that edge, but then it'd get scary on that precipice. Most people don't want to be out there. There have to be some people out there, the trailblazers have to be. But most people go up there and they get something out of it hopefully that they'll always keep, but then they back away from it and they settle down. On a societal scale it's like you wake up the next morning, y'know, and you're going "that was pretty wild shit". Then you go feed your cat.

Have you kept up with the current music that's been spawned by all of this?

Some of it, I like a lot of it. I keep wanting to hear someone saying

something about the real things that are going on in the evolution of the species. I just don't really hear it, I wish I did. It sounds so shitty because I love going to hear people play, and there's a lot of good musicians out there, great people and good songs. And it's probably good enough, just not exactly right for me.

Did you feel that void filled at all at the show the other night?

Some. I think that's one of the closest things to it, the stuff I heard was people really trying to get into that thing. And it's kinda beautiful because they're really sort of on their own, it's like kids raised without leaders, and on the one hand it's a waste of time but on the other they come up with some shit that no one would have come up with, because they had to. So you've got this new psychedelic thing happening and it's like they're coming up with shit that we wouldn't think about, because they're having to come up with something on their own. And that's really where it's all at; that's the whole thing in a way.

And how do you feel like you fit in, given that?

Well, I feel like not only is it a pleasure and an honour for me to do it, but I do think it's a responsibility, because I was sincere about it. Whether I was a big star or whether 15 people gave a shit or not, there were still those 15 people. That's a lot of people for one guy. Really. They always say if you can count your friends on one hand by the time you're 50 years old you've beat the game, you're a happy guy, and I can do that. So the fact that there happens to be some people around who've taken an interest is very rewarding to me, it really is. It's very satisfying to me.

George Kinney was interviewed