

Kieran Kane & Kevin Welch
You Can't Save Everybody
Compass COM 4385
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Musicians, songwriters, old friends: when Kieran Kane and Kevin Welch sit down together, the room is instantly engulfed in a soft glowing bonhomie. Not a raging, giddy friendship – something more insidious, a bit sinister. Deeper. It's a glow stoked by fast-flying sarcasm and the musical way Kieran and Kevin seamlessly complete one another's sentences. It doesn't matter if the room is a theatre, a recording studio, or (like today) the half-unpacked headquarters of Nashville's Compass Records. Perched on battered office chairs in the box-strewn promo room, they relate the roots of their new album *You Can't Save Everybody*.

"It's something we always wanted to do," says Kieran of *You Can't Save Everybody*, their first full-length studio collaboration. "We've toured together for years, we've appeared on each others records, but we just—"

"Well –," Kevin interjects, "The opportunity just never presented itself. But in 2003 we had an Australian tour on the books, and neither of us had made a record in a while. So we sat down and started brainstorming."

"The issue was: did we have enough songs?" Kieran clarifies. "We've never had a set list or even a rehearsal for our tours –v everything is spontaneous and kinda off-the-cuff. That philosophy spread to the making of this record. We didn't prepare for it: we just sat down and named songs that we'd written and performed, but hadn't recorded."

"Before long," Welch concludes, "we had a pretty good list together, and we went straight to the studio."

The resulting album offers powerful testament to the high standard that Kane and Welch hold themselves to as songwriters. Whereas most writers labor for months (if not years) to produce a collection of consistent, complimentary tunes, Kane and Welch pulled it off in three days. Once the songs were selected, they enlisted old friend and multi-instrumentalist Fats Kaplin and laid down the entirety of *You Can't Save Everybody* live in the studio over two nights. With a bare minimum of overdubs (all lead vocals and instrumental solos are live), the trio of Kane, Welch, and Kaplin deliver a masterfully understated set of impeccably crafted songs with disarming ease and immediacy.

Since the early 1980s, separately and together, Kieran Kane and Kevin Welch have been at the forefront of a new kind of roots songwriting: a sort of unflinching Americana, which builds new layers of detail, despair, and determination onto a timeless foundation of country, bluegrass, and blues. Kane and Welch emerged as the de facto spokesmen for this new generation of writers and performers when in 1995 they established Dead Reckoning, a combination record label, performing aggregation, and state of mind. Fellow Reckoners include such highly regarded figures as blues guitarist Mike Henderson, fiddler/vocalist Tammy Rogers, and noted session drummer/vocalist Harry Stinson.

Born in Queens, New York, Kieran Kane first rose to national prominence as a solo artist, with a pair of top-ten country singles on Elektra Records in the early 1980s. He soon joined forces with fellow songwriter Jamie O'Hara to form the duo the O'Kanes, who notched six more substantial country hits before bowing to what Kane describes as "major label pressures" in 1989. Re-emerging with a more personal, acoustic-based sound, Kane has continued to grow both as a performer and a songwriter. Recent cuts include Alan Jackson's hit single "I'll Go On Loving You."

Kevin Welch was an established anti-establishment songwriter long before meeting Kane in Nashville and founding

the Dead Reckoning imprint. Arriving in Nashville from his home state of Oklahoma, Welch quickly made a reputation for himself with the rootsy urgency and deceptively simple strength of his compositions. His music has been recorded by artists such as Waylon Jennings, Roger Miller, Charlie Pride, Patty Loveless, Trisha Yearwood, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, and Ricky Skaggs, while the audience for his own rough-hewed performing style continues to grow, particularly in Europe and Australia.

Having toured together extensively over the past decade, Kane and Welch have arrived a unique give and take onstage, effortlessly and telepathically trading songs, stories, breaks, and bridges. Their ease springs mainly from their long-standing friendship and mutual respect, aided by an unusual set-up. "We basically try to create a living room on stage," says Kane. "Two chairs, a nice rug, and a bottle of whisky on a table next to us."

"It was like that in the studio, too," Welch counters. "We just called Fats, set up a few good mics, and kept the lights dim and the tape rolling." Earning front-cover billing for his contributions, Fats Kaplin is indeed the session's secret weapon. Embroidering the elegant twang of Kane and Welch's own banjo, guitar, and octave-mandolin work with accordion, fiddle, and six-string Danelectro bass, Kaplin's subtle support work elevates the material and adds a distinctive shimmer to the proceedings.

After two late night sessions and very few overdubs ("A vocal harmony here or there," Kane admits, "and I beat on something for rhythm once or twice."), *You Can't Save Everybody* was born. As a whole, it too is defined by the effortlessly complimentary way Kane and Welch work together. Welch's seething "Everybody's Working for the Man Again" is beautifully contrasted with the graceful sadness of Kane's "Hillbilly Blue," while the desolation of Kane's title track is reinforced by Welch's winkingly ominous "Jersey Devil." Expertly conceived and executed, with spontaneity adding a noticeable edge and intensity, *You Can't Save Everybody* is a sublime document of two masterful songwriters and performers in perfect sync.