

KELLER WILLIAMS

The self-described “one-man band” steps away from his trademark loops for a pair of wildly different acoustic records. BY MIKE GREENHAUS

TWO AT A TIME

I have two albums coming out at the same time: *Sync*, with KWahtro, and *Raw*, which is a solo record. KWahtro is an evolution of the trio I've had for a few years. We started *Sync* in March or April, and the idea was that it was going to be done in tracks and each musician was gonna take it in his own time. I was hoping to have it finished by August but, long story short, that took a lot longer than I anticipated. We finished it in October and wanted to have a few months to tighten it up.

Raw is basically what I've been doing on this tour with Leo Kottke. Out of all the records I have done, we don't really have anything like this—it's just me and a solo acoustic guitar and microphone. The actual “raw record concept” started in 2011, and the idea was to do 12 songs with 12 different guitars. I finished it in about a week, and I didn't like it so I scrapped the whole concept. We went on to do a couple of different records, and then this Leo Kottke tour came about and I wanted to have something that was representative of that. I usually play a lot of clubs without seats where there is a social atmosphere, and that takes a lot of pressure off me, but these shows have been more like a night at the theater. So I took one or two songs from 2011 and added eight more on a couple different guitars. I'm proud to have two acoustic records that are also very different.

CREATIVE LOAFING

Both records have new versions of songs that have been released before. On *Raw*, we wanted to try out acoustic versions of some older songs and put out some songs that have never ended up on a record before. Songwriting has been tricky for me during the past several years, once I



had kids. My kids are 8 and 12 right now, and some decent songs have definitely come since they've been around, but not as many as before. In terms of songwriting, there usually has to be some kind of decompression that goes in from my career, and then some kind of boredom has to kick in, and that's when the creativity seems to flow with me; that's been my formula for a long time. And with kids, there's not really a whole lot of time to get bored. I try to schedule time in the day for exercise and some creativity but, when it's forced, sometimes it just doesn't happen like I'm used to. I'm still trying to find that line where I can come up with some songs that make it past a couple of plays live.

OUTSIDE A SMALL CIRCLE OF FRIENDS

KWahtro started as a trio with Jeff Sipe and Rob Wasserman [in 2015]. Jeff was in the project on paper until a couple months out when he got picked up to do a bunch of acoustic stuff with Warren Haynes, so my first call was to Rodney Holmes—this incredible drummer that I've always wanted to work with. I got turned on to Rodney from his Steve Kimock days in the early 2000s. Rodney was coming off of this big tour with Carlos Santana—Rob Thomas and

the *Supernatural* record—and, when that ended, he stayed with Steve Kimock for a couple of years. Rob [Wasserman] was also a huge fan of his and got to meet him while he was playing with Bob Weir. Rodney expressed interest in wanting to play with us and, after a couple of years of emails, we figured something out. And, of course, Rob got to the point where he was accepting one or two weekends out of the six or seven that I was offering. And it just felt like he needed time to really focus on his production company, so I called up Danton Boller, an incredible bass player that I saw with Jazz Mandolin Project. I just remembered his first name, “Danton”—it's one of those names—but I could never remember his *last* name. We searched him out, and he had a studio in Brooklyn and we all met there. I sent him 20 songs that he charted, learned and just nailed. He's just an unbelievable force on the upright bass, and I feel blessed and lucky to have him on my side. He's also done a few Grateful Grass gigs, where we do bluegrass versions of Grateful Dead songs, and he nails that, too.

PUZZLE PIECE

The last piece of the puzzle is Gibb Droll. He's an old buddy of mine that I used to see in

basements at fraternity houses in the '90s before I met him. We became friends and did this Droll and Sipe project [from] the spring of 2007 to late-2008. Since then, we've done a few sporadic little trio gigs, with me on bass and Jeff Sipe on drums, and just kind of stayed in touch. He is an amazing player, super listener—just a kind bro. He's evolved with Bruce Hornsby—he's one of the Noisemakers now—and is very dialed in to Brandi Carlile and her whole world. So there's a couple shows coming up where he is gonna be subbed by Mike Dillon on the vibes. [Dillon] appears on the record on a song called “Whatchu Want, Girl?” You gotta say it like that: “Whatchu Want, Girl!?”

ACOUSTIC EDM

Sync has four new songs as well as “Missing Remote,” which was cut from three or four different records and never found a home. And there's two older songs from my first two records. From the get-go, the idea for KWahtro was to play acoustic dance music. I have this unhealthy fascination with electronic music—all forms of the genre, from deep house to downtempo, dubstep, trap and brostep. I love that super dark, climbing half-step with the bass. I don't know a lot of other people who like that stuff and, obviously, I can't really go there with my career. Maybe that's why I like it so much. But my idea was to incorporate electronic dance music formulas into my music—use my songs as a template, and create tension builds and half-time drops, but with all acoustic instruments. The rhythm section of Danton and Rodney comes from a jazz background and they have that mentality, so instead of focusing on the formulas of electronic dance music, it morphed into more of a groovy, acoustic acid-jazz thing, and I'm really psyched. ●