



KEVIN MORBY

His muse has always stemmed from emergency: an escape from boredom, a flight from anxiety, from his hometown, from the politics of the day. But now that **Kevin Morby** is back in his native Kansas City and releasing his latest, best album yet, what will he run from next? **Eve Barlow** visits him at home to find out.

Photographs: **Rachael Wright**

We need to talk about Kevin: Morby hangs out in his garden, Kansas City, Missouri, 15 February, 2019.

Kansas City has been decimated by weather. It's minus 7°C. Inches of snow cover the flat areas of the suburbs. If the Midwest is a sandwich, you can't taste the meat for the bread. It looks inward, sustaining the status quo in streets that sleep between churches. Kevin Morby's own road is undisturbed. Outside his front door, a shovel is ready to battle the white that keeps him entrenched.

Morby's been closer to leaving the house lately. On the desk in his office are postcards decorated with the artwork for his fifth solo LP, *Oh My God*. They'll be mailed to fans to tease his first double album. The sleeve features a shirtless Morby sitting in front of a window (the window next door, behind his bed). The curtains are shut but light seeps through, like a still from a Sofia Coppola movie: religious overtones, oddly humorous.

Elsewhere on his desk lies a typewriter, fan mail and a separate postcard signed "CB" – Courtney Barnett. He recently toured >>

with Australia's biggest singer-songwriting export. Similar to Barnett, Morby is a local hero. In "Kan City", his house is humble, but with smatterings of rock star. Guitars and hats hang from every wall. A piano greets at the door. Original artwork by Mount Eerie's Phil Elverum, and Kurt Vile's handwriting rest against walls. An easel displays a half-finished canvas. In the garden lies a studio, a hot tub and a wooden sauna.

Even artists with decade-plus experience like Morby struggle to lay roots in L.A. and New York, both of which Morby's lived in. Heeding the advice he'd received from Kim Deal ("if you're a musician and you can buy property anywhere, buy it"), he decided there was no place like home, and returned in 2015. "Kansas City is the latest place I don't spend time in," he jokes.

For the past six years, Morby spent time inside his records. Since the release of 2013's *Harlem River*, he's created worlds around his intimate and elegant songwriting. *Harlem River* was his goodbye to New York. His third, *Singing Saw*, grappled with California's wilderness. He's been compared to Joni Mitchell and Lou Reed. With every release the critique is consistent: the music is his best yet. "Some songwriters get into a routine of making records that sound the same," he muses. "I hope I keep releasing better ones."

Oh My God is his first grandiose concept; a point of arrival after years on a road well travelled. It's a return to his own Jerusalem, rich with pianos, organs, choirs, spoken soliloquies and saxophone. The space it houses is so lofty you can smell the damp of a cold cathedral. Morby didn't grow up religious, but this home is filled with iconography. "I love things that are religious," he says. "In the same way I love westerns. Hanging a portrait of Jesus Christ is like hanging a portrait of a cowboy. They look cool. They're beautiful."

Parallels exist between Jesus, cowboys and rock stars. Recently Morby re-watched a Marilyn Manson interview from MTV, in which angry mothers gave the antichrist a piece of their mind. Manson responds: "I looked up to Jesus!" "It makes sense," says Morby, "religion is one of those broad platforms. You relate to it or you hate it. But it's so in the air you're going to have a take on it." Today, the phrase "Oh my God" (or "omg") is used by those who denounce religion. "If you see the funniest comedian," he continues, "it's, 'Oh my God it's so funny.' A family member dies? 'Oh my God I miss them.' It captures the hilarity, the tragedy and the triumph."

Morby's stemmed from tragedy, not triumph. Since the release of his last record, 2017's *City Music*, America has become a more hysterical place. "You turn on the news and 'Oh my God' comes out your mouth," he says. In 2016, Morby wrote a song called

Put your hands together for...: Morby hopes to "keep releasing better records."



Beautiful Strangers as a reaction to the Bataclan attacks, police killings of African Americans, etc. His audiences kept singing the refrain back, including the lyric: "Oh my God." He wrote those words out of desperation. "I didn't know what else to say. Then I took that concept and ran with it."

Morby has been running forever. Born in Lubbock, Texas, his first 10 years were spent relocating between here, Detroit, Tulsa and Oklahoma City. At the age of 10, his parents settled. "I loved and hated Kansas City. It was a great place to grow up. I can relate to most people because of it." Music was solely Morby's thing (his mother played clarinet in school, he offers). "I've no memory of my dad listening to anything other than Meatloaf." His access to grittier sounds came via sister McKayla, who'd send off for magazine offers: 100 CDs for \$100. Third Eye Blind and Green Day were his gateway. "I listened to Third Eye Blind's self-titled debut thinking, 'I can't believe every song on this record is so good!' It was the first time I ever thought: 'I wanna play music.'" He started writing songs when he was eight, and picked an electric guitar out of a Sears catalogue for his 10th Christmas. "It was delivered to my non-musical family. We didn't know how to tune it. My dad popped the strings."

He wrote songs on it regardless and found a teacher through his baseball team. He'd play him original compositions. "The look on his face!" he says now. "I could tell he didn't like it. He said, 'You know what? Some day you're gonna be really good at that.' I thought, 'Maybe if I keep trying...'"

Morby's adolescence was defined by playing in bands (Creepy Aliens was one), and performing under his own name. He'd study the "titans". "I'd watch every Bob Dylan documentary." He was influenced by lo-fi bands: The Microphones, The Mountain

Goats, Neutral Milk Hotel. His aim was to merge the two. Music became a social lubricant. Downtown thrived on DIY culture. Morby and pals put on shows in warehouses. Drumming for Creepy Aliens took him on his first toilet-circuit tour, aged 17. Eventually he dropped out of school. "I had problems with anxiety. My grades got so bad," he says. "I just hated school." He'd been taking medication for panic attacks. When he came off, everything spiralled and his parents let him walk away. "Life is too short," he says. "But you think dropping out is gonna be this wonderland, and my parents told me to get a job. I did that. It sucked."

Morby had odd jobs at an Indian restaurant, and a telecoms company. Due to his anxiety, he'd never considered leaving the Midwest. Suddenly he felt trapped. "I thought: 'If I don't leave, I'll just die here.'" He took his guitar and boarded a train to New York. "I'd go to the Chelsea Hotel. I couldn't believe it. I never felt more at home than during that time. I found the place that represented me."

The Midwest imbued Morby with an underdog mindset. He told nobody he played music. He did bike delivery to make rent. "I'd ride in New York traffic carrying fried chicken, delivering it to some asshole. I got shot with paintball guns, I got in wrecks. It's part of being a New Yorker." Things shifted when he met Jeremy

Earl, frontman of experimental folk band Woods. Woods were 10 years his senior. "They were these teachers," he recalls. They were regulars at a bar he tended. When a spot became available in their apartment, Morby moved in. "I was this young kid. They asked me to play bass. I thought they were joking."

Soon enough, he was going on tour to Europe. It was validating for Morby who had "been in a million bands", and a godsend for his parents. "They thought I was gonna end up dead like in a *Law & Order* episode. They'd find my body in a canal." While riding that wave, his zest for the scene led him to create another band. He'd make four albums with Woods, and two with The Babies, a garage-rock collaboration with ex-roommate Cassie Ramone. Ramone was also in Vivian Girls. Before he lived with Woods, Ramone and Morby wrote songs on guitar in their living room. They ran into each other at a bodega years later en route to a house party. "She goes: 'Are you buying some road sodas too? We should start a band called Road Sodas...'" Before long Pitchfork wrote up their first impromptu gig as the birth of a supergroup.

"Vivian Girls and Woods form The Babies!" he remembers. "For better or worse, it sent us on this trajectory. People wanted to go to shows all over the world." It was a slog and a fun one. They'd play up to 15 shows a month. "Pitchfork told the world about us then tore us apart: a great lesson. Brooklynites were obsessed with what Pitchfork said about your band. They slayed us." Woods conversely got rave reviews. "I remember it was a crossroads in my career. I either go >>

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In the Woods: Morby (second right) in 2012.



Sprog rock: with The Babies (centre), 2012.

battle against the wind or I call it quits.” At 20, Morby didn’t quit. He chose Woods until 2013. Then a desire to pursue his own output kicked in. He left.

“The life of a Los Angeleno is a walk in the park compared to New York,” he says, of a move West. “It was a retirement community of songwriters. We moved to where the sun was and put ourselves back together.”

If you judge people by the company they keep, Morby is a good egg. When he moved to LA, he met Welsh singer-songwriter Cate Le Bon and Tim Presley of White Fence. In the kitchen today, his girlfriend Katie Crutchfield (who performs as Waxahatchee) is playing stylist. He walks in with a varsity jacket on, seeking advice on how many buttons to do up. They wonder: what would Jonathan Van Ness do?

It was in New York that Morby made Oh My God with long-term producer Sam Cohen. They stripped back his sound to organ, congas and vocals and found themselves spooked by the results. That experiment – Nothing Sacred/All Things Wild – is the backbone. It feels holy but it rocks, like I’m Comin’ Down by Primal Scream. There are political overtones too.

Mercurial Kev: Morby performing at Desert Daze festival, California, 2018; (inset) new album Oh My God.



“I’m so afraid of flying. I do so much writing. Things become crystal clear. There’s science to it: you’re more fragile. It’s the oxygen you’re breathing. Things can profoundly make sense.”

Piss River is the most akin to a protest song, all Dylan and Sam Cooke in structure. O Behold contains a Mother Earth metaphor reminiscent of Tracy Chapman’s The Rape Of The World. He lost the verses calling out Trump. “It’s such a dirty word, Trump. I hate talking about it, giving him that power,” he says. “When he was elected my songwriting friends said, ‘Our duty is to make political music.’” He cites a Leonard Cohen quote about “all music is political music.”

“The act of being an artist and doing your craft, spreading that peace, living the life...” he sighs. “Death is surrounding all of us.”

Morby’s catalogue is an exploration of man’s solitude. This is his first record that rejects ego. Instead it looks outwards to community. The perspective came as Morby was in transit. The lyrics were written on planes. The motif of being “above the weather” repeats – a nod to being at high altitude. What goes



on in Morby’s head when he’s in the sky? “I’m so afraid of flying. I do so much writing. Things become crystal clear. There’s science to it: you’re more fragile. It’s the oxygen you’re breathing. I hate the airport and take-offs, the thinking I might die, but then things make sense in this profound way.”

He points out the window. “We’re below the weather and it’s snowing hard outside, but above those clouds it’s blue sky, always there, this human heaven, this weird safe kingdom in between two places where you’re unreachable. Fascinating.” There’s a timelessness to being in the air. It doesn’t react at the same rate as the world below. “Patti Smith said recently: ‘as the skyline continues to change in New York nothing will change the way the air feels.’ This is not going away. Us humans might.”

Morby confesses to writing his records in pairs. He’s already written Oh My God’s sequel. “It’s my Kansas record,” he says, proudly. He recorded it here in the garden and finished it in Texas. “I play almost everything on it – just me.” If it’s his Kansas record, the question presents itself: where to next? On the

drive back from Texas, he says Crutchfield made an observation. “She said, ‘Everywhere we go, you say: I love it here.’”

Newly turned 30, he’s far from putting his feet up. Staying inspired is “effortless”. “Growing up in the Midwest, you’ll learn to hate the Midwest,” he says. “Then you move to New York and LA. After a while you need to go. I’ve had this constant feeling in my life: ‘I gotta fucking get outta here.’ I’m learning now that sometimes the least interesting places contain the tales that have never been told.”

The thought follows Q onto the flight back home as the plane chases the sunset on the horizon across time zones. Below the weather, the stories continue.



“I love things that are religious.” Morby at home, February 2019.

➔ The Best Of KEVIN MORBY

From catchy garage-punk to religious-themed epics and jazzy experimentalism, the pick of Kev...

1 Pick Up Woods

(At Echo Lake, 2010)
Country-tinged indie pop that spruces up The Grateful Dead for a new generation. This was the second LP Morby played bass on for the Brooklyn folk-rock band.

2 Get Lost The Babies

(Our House On The Hill, 2012)
The Babies may have intended to be just a side-project, but their noisy garage punk proved too catchy to ignore. Morby steps up to frontman here.

3 Harlem River Kevin Morby

(Harlem River, 2013)
“Harlem River talk to me, tell me what you think about...” coos Morby over a sparse backing. A ’60s-inflected paean to his New York, after moving out West.

4 Amen Kevin Morby

(Still Life, 2014)
An eight-minute epic that showcases Morby’s ambition. “I’m not dead, but I’m dying so slow, so slow,” he sings midway through, accepting his inevitable fate.

5 Dorothy Kevin Morby

(Singing Saw, 2016)
“Dorothy” is the name of Morby’s guitar, which is electrifying and at the forefront of this grittier number, featuring stabbing pianos and his lazed, Dylan drawl.

6 Come To Me Now Kevin Morby

(City Music, 2017)
Although made on a beach in California, City Music explores the loneliness of surviving in the rat race. This opener is devastating in its sultriness.

7 Beautiful Strangers Kevin Morby

(Beautiful Strangers/No Place To Fall, 2016)
There’s an R&B lilt to Morby’s first political track – a meditative protest song that refers to the Bataclan attacks.

8 Destroyer Kevin Morby

(Live At Third Man Records, 2018)
A sparse recording of one of Singing Saw’s highlights – a sad but wise ode to the self-fulfilling prophecies that accompany life as a struggling artist.

9 Farewell Transmission Kevin Morby and Waxahatchee

(Farewell Transmission/The Dark Don’t Hide It, 2018)
Jangly cover of the Jason Molina classic by Waxahatchee’s Katie Crutchfield and partner.

10 No Halo Kevin Morby

(Oh My God, 2019)
The crispest Morby has ever sounded, and the most experimental. A hand-clap assisted, jazzy reflection on the loss of innocence, with added choir.