

## A Beautiful Late Summer Snow

Written by Jeff Ignatius

Wednesday, 13 September 2000 18:00

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There's nothing fancy-pants about Kelly Pardekooper's music. It's as unassuming, familiar, comfortable, and rugged as denim. That's not to say it's pedestrian. Far from it. Pardekooper's new album, Johnson County Snow (on the well-regarded Trailer Records label), is simply spectacular, with 10 beautifully crafted pieces of corn-fed rock from Iowa City. It's a great feeling to discover something so wonderful in your own backyard, and a touch sad to realize how few people will share it. Johnson County Snow is full of music that just doesn't get made very often these days. It has the same vibe – if not sound – as the best Chris Isaak albums: straightforward, honest, and not nearly as simple or easy as it sounds and feels. You can put it on as background music or give it the all-ears treatment; it rewards however much attention you're willing to offer it. After so much unfettered praise, I must admit that Pardekooper is not the world's most expressive singer; his voice is flat, adorned only with a twangy bite or pinch, and he sometimes draws out his words like Dylan or Petty. But he has a great offhand urgency and perfect rhythm, and what he lacks in art he makes up for in songwriting. Pardekooper seems to understand his vocal shortcomings, and like some of the more interesting elder wordsmiths – Neil Young, Tom Waits, and Richard Thompson – his delivery makes it easy to overlook the dazzling lines he casually drops into his songs. Johnson County Snow's first words are an announcement that you're listening to something special: "I cannot help it if your skin don't fit you right." A mere 11 words pack more meaning than most songs: detached exasperation, intimacy, powerlessness, a bit of bitterness. There's also some playfulness at work. In "Kin," Pardekooper gives a literal reading of a cliché and renders the next line metaphoric: "You can't take the high road / It's washed out again." That verbal acuity brings to mind the early career of Soul Asylum's Dave Pirner. Before his band sold any records, Pirner proved himself a sharp, sly storyteller and musical craftsman, although the Minneapolis post-punk sound of Hüsker Dü was as much an influence as country and blues. Johnson County Snow strikes the same balance between coherency and variety as Soul Asylum's 1990 *And the Horse They Rode In On*, one of my favorite albums. Pardekooper's music, like his lyrics and Pirner's compositions, is tight, textured, and rich. There's phenomenal interplay among Pardekooper and The Devil's House Band, particularly guitarist Dustin Busch. Drummer

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Matt Winegardner and bassist Atom Robinson keep a lively yet steady bottom, while Pardekooper and Busch do most of the heavy instrumental lifting, creating layers of varied, engaging guitars. David Zollo's production is crisp and clean, allowing the listener easy access to all the album's facets. Johnson County Snow encompasses a lot of musical traditions, driving country motifs at bluegrass speeds with flavors of rockabilly and blues and Southern rock, packaged with pop economy. The first two tracks lean toward country, with "Fly on the Wall" a hip-moving boogie and "Compromise" a keyboard-driven ballad. They're strong tracks, but between those and "Sunday Afternoon" six songs later is a meaty midsection that comes as a bit of a shock after the roadhouse opening. It's a stylistic blend that recalls the country punk of the Meat Puppets, stretching the boundaries of guitar-driven pop. As consistent as Johnson County Snow is, "Kin" and "Mrs. Brown" stand out, driving songs that Tom Petty only wishes he could make. Bo Ramsey joins the band for "Upside Down," and his laconic, sad guitar line is an elegant expression of the song's fatigue. The venerated bluesman's contribution is apparent but completely selfless – a symbol of the importance of song over personality. "Waterloo" and "Young American" follow with infectious grooves and remarkable guitar work; they're lyrically the simplest songs on the album yet stand tall as hooky anthems. "Sunday Afternoon" and "Long White Dress" (again with Ramsey) serve as country bookends, bringing the album full circle to the title track, a lament that closes the album. It's an appropriately mournful tune, because it's a shame that these 40 minutes must end. All this gushing feels a bit unseemly. Put simply, Johnson County Snow is a damn fine record, and I haven't heard anything better this year. Kelly Pardekooper and The Devil's House Band will perform at Sal's Music Emporium in Iowa City at 6 p.m. September 8. The CD release party will continue later in the evening at The Green Room.