

While carrying the blues around the world, from the Equator to the Arctic Circle, Guy Davis came back with some fresh inspiration and new stories to tell. *Kokomo Kidd*, Guy's follow-up album to the hugely successful "Juba Dance" from 2013, finds the blues ambassador visiting fresh territory. "It's a new beginning for me," he says, "The first time I produced myself. What I'm showing here is a side of me that's deep inside. It's needing air and light, and here it comes!"

His deft acoustic playing and well-crafted lyrics are here as always. And though Davis calls on his gifts as an actor and storyteller, some of his new songs are personal as it gets. "I Wish I Hadn't Stayed Away So Long" confronts loss and pays tribute to a role model, Pete Seeger. "I was on Pete's last official tour, witnessing with my own eyes something I'd heard since I was a child," he says. Songs like "She Just Wants" and "Blackberry Kisses" get deep into romantic and sexual matters. "I've done the L-word, and Lord knows I've written my share of double entendres and even single entendres about sex. But if you listen to 'Blackberry Kisses,' you won't hear a lot of blues songs that go into waltz time in the middle."

The rollicking title track, featuring Ben Jaffe of New Orleans' Preservation Hall Jazz Band, might be called a short story that you can dance to, featuring a rascal character who starts as a bootlegger and winds up a Republican advisor. "It's sort of a demented celebration of corruption," Guy says. "The Kidd represents all the forces that operate on the margins of society. That song says something about who I am, because I just don't follow blues musicians, even though they're very dear to me. But another one of my influences is someone I'd consider America's modern Shakespeare, and that's Garrison Keillor."

The song's New Orleans connection harks back to a formative visit he made to the Crescent City in 1979, a trip that convinced him to follow his muse as a performer. "I was playing the streets and Al Jaffe [Preservation Hall founder and Ben's father] came out and saw me. Not only did he take me inside to meet all the players, he gave me the official Preservation Hall uniform tie, which I have to this day. Not only that, but I ran into [legendary jazz bassist] Milt Hinton, who'd been my professor at Hunter College. He saw me playing on the street and thought, great—I'd finally made something of myself!"

Another notable friend, harmonica ace Charlie Musselwhite, appears on a version of the Howlin' Wolf classic "Little Red Rooster." But the most surprising of the four non-originals has to be Donovan's "Wear Your Love Like Heaven." As Davis explains, "I loved that song back when I was a kid, and I wasn't even sure why—It wasn't especially rhythmic, more on the acoustic psychedelic side of things. Growing up as an African-American, it was always about James Brown, soul music. Same with the Bob Dylan song, 'Lay Lady Lay'—There was a time when I wouldn't have had the self-confidence to do a song like that."

Guy Davis' work as an actor, author, and lately teacher earmark him as a renaissance man of the blues. Back in 1995 he acted Off-Broadway in his own play, *The Adventures of Fishy Waters: In Bed With the Blues*, which has since seen a CD release. More recently he joined the Broadway production of *Finian's Rainbow*, playing the part originally done in 1947 by Sonny Terry—an experience that inspired the *Kokomo Kidd* song "Like Sonny Did." What music and acting have in common, he explains, "is that I don't like people to see the hard work and the sweat that goes into what I do. I want them to hear me and be uplifted. And I want some little eight-year-old kid in the front row to have big eyes and say, 'Hey, I want to do that!'"