

THE GABE DIXON BAND

The Gabe Dixon Band's new, self-titled album (Fantasy Records, August 26) is in fact the group's third release, following the 2002 album *On a Rolling Ball* and the 2005 EP *Live at World Café*, but there's good reason the writer/singer/pianist considers it GDB's debut.

Formed nine years ago by Dixon — then a classical piano major at the University of Miami — and his two college roommates, bassist Winston Harrison and drummer Jano Rix, the group added a sax player and spent several years specializing in jazz-infllected, heavily improvised excursions, showcasing the virtuosity of the players. Dixon's elevated chops also led to some high-profile moonlighting: along with performing with Alison Krauss, O.A.R. and others, the talented youngster played keyboards on Paul McCartney's *Driving Rain*, while also backing the great one at the internationally broadcast "Concert For New York City." McCartney offered him the keyboard slot for his world tour, but Gabe respectfully turned him down to focus his energies on his band's then-yet-to-be-released Warner Bros. debut.

But after being dispirited and nearly derailed by cutbacks and regime changes at the band's former label, Dixon shifted his focus to songcraft, and in 2006 the three longtime bandmates had a collective epiphany. "We realized when we were all living in different states and that there was too much musical chemistry going on between us to give it up," Dixon recalls. They reinvented themselves as a three-piece, song-based unit, putting the same attention to detail to arrangement and song-serving performance that the bandleader was giving to his writing.

To say that the move has paid off would be a gross understatement, because *The Gabe Dixon Band* belatedly but undeniably introduces a world-class unit fronted by a prodigiously talented artist. A reviewer for *The Nashville Tennessean*, Dixon's hometown paper, called it early when he stated unequivocally in 2005 that the young artist "deserves to join the ranks of Jackson Browne and early Elton John in the pop pantheon."

The trio, with Harrison doubling on mandator, a modified guitar he created whose sound somewhat resembles that of an electric mandolin, cut the album live off the floor during ten days at Nashville's renowned Blackbird Studios with co-producer/engineer mixer Neal Cappellino (Alison Krauss, Mindy Smith, Jonny Lang), and it's evident the principals brought their A-games to the sessions. The album embeds vividly detailed, intensely personal and universally relatable songs in elegant yet muscular settings that draw, unabashedly and expertly, on classic rock, and the combination is intoxicating.

Both the material and the supple arrangements result from "the music we heard growing up, listening to our parents' record collections," Dixon points out. "Mostly '70s LPs by Elton John, Jackson Browne, Paul Simon, Stevie Wonder, Ray Charles, Joni Mitchell, Bob Dylan, Carole King and James Taylor. It was a magical era, the pinnacle of pop, rock and folk in terms of songwriting and musicianship." His first influence, though, was the Beatles. "That came from my mom," says Gabe with a fond laugh. "As a teenager, she was kicked out of a Beatles movie for screaming too loud."

Given the band's innate feel for rock's glory days, it's entirely fitting that the legendary Henry Diltz, whose unforgettable photographs of greats like Neil Young, the Doors and Crosby, Stills & Nash have become an indelible part of rock history, shot the images that grace the album package.

Dixon and his bandmates have not only assimilated those influences but brought them into the present tense, resulting in music that is instantly familiar both musically and thematically, yet still provocative and in the moment. And though Dixon claims that the album is simply a collection of songs written over the last several years, a theme emerges. In this artist's cosmology, as it was with his forebears, highways are potent metaphors for romantic and spiritual connection, which can lead to new insights or back to one's roots, and the album is crisscrossed by characters on journeys between states of mind as well as places on a roadmap.

The opening "Disappear" is a panoramic song of escape and redemption in the grand tradition of Paul Simon's "America" and Bruce Springsteen's "Thunder Road." The following "Five More Hours" poetically recounts Dixon's growing elation as he leaves New York, where he'd been living, to return home to Nashville. "Angel don't stop 'cause I'm almost home," he sings, cruising along on a burnished, expansive arrangement redolent of Elton John's *Tumbleweed Connection* (one of his all-time favorite albums). It's unclear whether Angel is his traveling companion or some guiding spirit — which only increases the song's beguiling character. It's one of three co-written by onetime Trip Shakespeare and Semisonic frontman Dan Wilson, whose co-write of the Dixie Chicks' "Not Ready to Make Nice" earned him a Grammy.

"The inspiration for 'Five More Hours' and for 'Find My Way,' the other song we recorded in the first session for the new album, came directly out of what was going on when I wrote them," Dixon explains. "The band was living in Brooklyn and touring constantly, and the label took away our tour support a month before the album was scheduled to come out. So we gave up our place in Brooklyn, I rented a U-Haul and started driving home. At that point I was trying to figure out what to do next, and I realize now that it was all leading me back to my roots."

Then comes the stunning ballad "Further the Sky," an instant standard sung with Mindy Smith at her most inspired that leaves no doubts about Dixon's vocal chops and expressiveness. "I think of it as a Taoist song," Dixon says of "Further," a collaboration with gifted Nashville songsmith Tia Sillers (who won a Grammy of her own, for Lee Ann Womack's "I Hope You Dance"), and the final piece written for the album. He's referring to the metaphysical riddles of its chorus: "The higher you reach, the further the sky / The more miles you walk, the longer the road / The steeper you climb, the harder you stand to fall / The stronger you get, the heavier the load."

Batting cleanup is Dixon and Wilson's "All Will Be Well," another highway anthem, this one written after the artist watched the Dylan documentary *Don't Look Back* and was entranced by the young bard's solo performances, which he describes as "a direct channel of honesty." The impact of this revelation is apparent in the resulting song, with its thrillingly cinematic refrain: "All the children walking home past the factories / Can see the light that's shining in my window as I write this song to you / And all the cars running fast along the interstate / Can feel the love that radiates, illuminating what I know is true."

"I wrote 'All Will Be Well' at the end of 2004, when I was starting to come to an acceptance of the situation with the record label," Gabe says of the emotional crossroads he was approaching at the time. "And I realized that even though things hadn't gone the way I'd hoped they would, it wasn't the end of the world, and I could start a new chapter. It felt like a sort of blooming."

The first half of the album (which certainly feels like it has two sides, like its sources of inspiration) is rounded off by "Find My Way," an ivory-tickling romp in the grand tradition of Elton, Jerry Lee Lewis, Billy Preston and the Ben Folds 5. If you don't find yourself caught up in the album's musical momentum and psychological depth after these five songs, you're probably better off sticking to NASCAR or knitting.

The LP's second half is as far-ranging as the first is focused, encompassing the widescreen ballad "Ever After You," the luminous solo piano piece "And the World Turned" (another Sillers co-write) and the three-part, parallel narrative "Sirens," which Dixon semi-facetiously describes as "a bluegrass, drone-y, Middle Eastern song about temptation."

Of the newfound focus of his onetime jam band, Dixon says, "We love great songs and real musicianship, and we take the time as a band to come up with something that isn't typical, because the arrangement and performance can be just as impactful as the song itself. We've become more refined and to the point, making the impact direct and immediate. The idea is pretty simple, really: We're dedicated to playing music people like that we like too."

From this immensely promising vantage point, it's been quite a journey for a guy who a decade ago was playing Tootsie's Orchid Lounge in downtown Nashville every afternoon from 1 to 5 for tips. The bridge of "All Will Be Well" could serve as the credo for Dixon and his bandmates. "You've got to keep it up and don't give up and chase your dreams," he sings, "and you will find / All in time."