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Country, rock get common-law hitched by Ken Will Morton

BY MICHAEL ANDREWS

Since heading south from Connecticut in the mid 1990s, Athens performer Ken Will Morton has steadily crafted a warm, bluesy style of Americana that's heavy on both grit and grace. The sometimes-solo, sometimes-accompanied singer/songwriter specializes in an observant blend of progressive country, blues, and melodic garage pop.

Morton's music is the byproduct of an ongoing fascination with the American South, as well as the diverse cast of characters encountered along its dirt roads and highways.

A few years after relocating to the Athens area, virtual one-man band Morton partnered up with like-minded pals Brandon Hicks, Kyle Harris, and Nic Goodson (frontman for dreamy Athens Americana ensemble Sleepy Horses), who began backing up Morton as the Wholly Ghosts.

Though some of Morton's material does fit the mold of Americana, modern folk, or alt-country, he's not an easy man to nutshell. From the Minutemen to the Replacements, the guy knows his punk and indie rock, too. There's also the influence of such hard-living, sad song-singing troubadours such as Merle Haggard, George Jones, and Townes Van Zandt and the grizzled bluesmen who kept the Gulf Coast's Eisenhower-era juke joints buzzing way past closing time.

Morton's far-reaching taste in music brings added dimensions to his recent set of albums, *Devil in Me* and *Kickin' Out the Rungs*. Before you even hear the first song off either release, Morton's already revealed himself as a true audiophile. These distinctly different records arrive in cover art almost ripped directly from the specialty label heyday of the '50s and '60s. *Devil's* black and white/neon yellow layout recalls releases from the old country/western King and Saturday imprints while *Kickin' Out the Rungs'* midnight blue-drenched silhouette is reminiscent of an old Motown or Stax LP. It's what's inside the smartly designed packages, though, that speaks the loudest.

Devil in Me finds Morton and the Ghosts tearing through 11 songs infused with gnarly, red-eyed guitars, and his southern drawl. "Boogie Shoes" is a hip-shaking rocker that rides a chugging, contagious rhythm in the style of John Lee Hooker's "Boogie Chillen," while the title track sets a restless and shadowy mood for the remainder of the basement-recorded album. "Release the White Doves" is Morton boiled down to his basic ingredients.

If *Devil in Me* is the proverbial Saturday night of the two releases, then *Kickin' Out the Rungs* is the bleary-eyed Sunday morning. It's more of an introspective, in-studio set that, despite focusing on acoustic material, doesn't find Morton muting the volume or slowing down the tempo too much. The lyrics come across a little more personal and remorseful than those on *Devil*, as well.

Though Morton always seems to display a keen sense of melody, you'd be hard pressed to call anything here "hooky." Instead, it's often the rough edges and healed-over scars that make Morton's music really stand out.

Whether stomping boots, clapping hands, or strapping on his trusty mouth harp, Morton remains one of the Classic City's most well-rounded singer/songwriters and one whose further progression as an artist should be a hell of a lot of fun to watch ... and, certainly, to listen to.