

AMPLIFICATION

KID DAKOTA

GO WEST YOUNG MAN



By Alex Green / “Like a good poem, I think the responsibility of a song is to create a space where a story can unfold,” says Kid Dakota’s singer/songwriter Darren Jackson. “I think a message will be delivered regardless of how the story is communicated, but I think it’s important to let the story show itself.” On his band’s new album, *The West Is The Future*, the stories of which Jackson speaks are revealed one after the other in engaging, albeit sometimes bleak, character sketches.

With an eye for damaged people, the kind unable to look each other in the eye, the kind that are sorry for what they’ve done but can’t stop doing it, Jackson’s compositions conjure a gothic South Dakota, a barren terrain whose inhabitants find its emptiness positively stultifying. And those inhabitants—the kind that Flannery O’Connor might have written about had she been from the Midwest— may wander around in the cold, woozy and emotionally dazed, but one gets the feeling

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that they’re inured to the bitter chill; as well as the coldness in their hearts.

Having grown up in South Dakota, Jackson acknowledges the influence of the frozen landscapes of his home state, but admits to seeing an even larger picture. “It’s not so much the frozen landscape per se that informs the songs,” he says, “but rather desolate landscapes in general. The inspiration could just as well be the Midwestern prairie on a dusty summer day as a frozen lake in rural Minnesota. It’s the desolate spaces that seem to extend forever on a horizontal axis that really speak to me. This influence is probably a result of growing up in South Dakota but it also stems from the feeling I get when I’m in the middle of nowhere and there’s nothing obscuring my

view of the horizon. It’s a feeling that calms and inspires awe, but also reminds me of my finitude and insignificance. I don’t think the vertical nature of urban landscapes can produce this feeling as effectively as the rural flatlands of the Midwest. It’s this feeling that I try to make manifest in my music.”

From the searing roots rock of “Pilgrim” or “Homesteader,” to the confessional mid-tempo ballad “Ten Thousand Lakes” or the spare “2001,” the songs on *The West Is The Future* showcase an impressive musical range. But what makes the compositions so remarkable is the lyrical perspective that Jackson manages in songs with such seemingly disparate narrators. Able to slip into the guise of his characters with ease, Jackson attributes this ability to his specific thematic approach. “That I can feel what my characters are feeling despite the fact that I’ve never been in their situation is largely due to the universal nature of the themes I present,” he says. “Granted, I’ve never endured a pod crash landing like the character in ‘2001’ (which imagines an alternative ending to the Kubrick film), but I know how it feels to be given a second-chance at life.” And the themes to which Jackson refers? “Loss, alienation, regret, addiction, recovery, obsession, decadence, hope and ennui.”

The West Is The Future is not a concept album about the desolate prairies of South Dakota, but its songs of drug addicts, farmers and fishermen is a careful, emotional study of a varied cast of loners, travelers, drifters and couples who all seem to have something in common besides their geography. “I’m not certain that all the characters share any one emotion,” Jackson says, “but most of them are encountering harsh, unfamiliar environments.”

Even though the songs have a palpable sense of sadness, Jackson doesn’t see the album as being bleak. “I don’t know if it’s more or less hopeful,” he says, comparing it to his previous work, “but I think that the stories remain unresolved...which allows for the possibility of hope. It’s uncertain as to what happens to the protagonists in ‘Starlight Motel,’ ‘2001’ or ‘Ten Thousand Lakes.’ Maybe things get better for them, maybe they get worse.”

