# Mp3 Michael Koppy - Red River Redux


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Blazing finger-picking combined with astonishingly fresh versions of classic cowboy songs and forgotten pop gems, along with the controversional original "One Great Mornin' (The South's Gonna Rise Again)". 16 MP3 Songs COUNTRY: Traditional Country, COUNTRY: Cowboy Details: ABOUT THE MUSIC Michael sometimes calls what he does front porch music, by which he means music that evolves when it passes from one player to the next, as songs did before radio fixed particular versions in the public mind. Thats how it was for him growing up in Tallahassee, where he spent long afternoons at Ashmores General Store in Frenchtown, the citys black neighborhood, learning tunes from the street musicians and day laborers who gathered there. One of these was Emmett Goodman, who appeared one day after walking five hundred miles from Miami, because, he explained, an owl had told him to. Like generations of self-taught musicians, Emmett didnt hesitate to change chords, lyrics, or melodies if he felt alterations would serve the song, and Michael carries on that tradition. The first track demonstrates the process with three versions of a song that has been evolving for more than two-hundred years, falling in and out of copyright. The songs that follow are Michaels interpretations as he learned or adapted them. The original writers are credited if known, along with other contributors who created variations that led to Michaels versions. Also here is his own One Great Mornin, a song of fierce indignation in the tradition of Woody Guthrie and infused with the muckraking spirit of Upton Sinclair. In it, Michael takes aim at the cynical opportunists who have replaced our glory with the tawdry and the crass in his beloved South. It is a song that is bound to spark controversy. ---------- ABOUT MICHAEL KOPPY Like the music he plays, Michael Koppy is himself a mix of down-home integrity and big-city hustle. Raised in Tallahassee, Florida, he was expelled from high school, despite being a finalist for a National Merit Scholarship. In 1967, he ran away from home, hitch-hiking to San Francisco just in time for the Summer of Love. That was the first of what

would be nine trips he took across the country by thumb and boxcar ("Riding the rails isn't really all that romantic or comfortable," he reports wryly.) Traveling with little more than a guitar and a bag of clothes, he worked as a laborer in a gunpowder factory, Broadway stagehand, elevator operator, carnival barker, union organizer, small-town newspaper editor, construction worker, strip-show spotlight operator, and many other odd jobs. Finally settling in San Francisco, Michael boot-strapped his way into the entertainment industry, eventually producing and directing stage musicals, television, and concerts (Buck Owens, the Blues Project, Riders in the Sky), and other events. Strangely, the one career Michael did not pursue was that of performer. Indeed, close friends didn't even know he owned a guitar, much less that he could play one. For twenty-five years, the only way to hear his music would be to walk by his front porch on the right evening, where you might catch him playing some impressive riffs while relaxing with a cold beer. But in retrospect, perhaps it's not so odd that Michael never thought about performing in public. His repertoire, after all, was a grab-bag of old cowboy songs he'd changed to his liking, blues he'd learned from Tallahassee street musicians, ballads he'd modified, his own interpretations of traditional tunes, and bastardized pop ditties he'd heard so long ago he'd forgotten where  along with idiosyncratic originals. Who'd be interested in this mlange of organic mash-ups? Lots of people, as it turned out. On his way home from work one evening in 2001, he dropped into a bar where an open mic night was in progress. "You'd think I'd at least know what an 'open mic night' was," Michael says, "but I honestly didn't." It was only after the barmaid explained the concept  and then spent six weeks encouraging him that he finally stepped on stage. The burst of applause when he finished proved there was an audience hungry for his refreshing "front porch" style of music. Within weeks Michael was being invited to perform around San Francisco, with regular gigs and a growing reputation. He was sometimes sandwiched between rock bands, but his unique style and songs charmed even these audiences. A short time later Los Angeles producer Garrett Soden heard Michael at the Hotel Utah Saloon, and approached him after the show with an offer to make a record. Michael's debut album, "Red River Redux," was released in the spring of 2006. -- Jane Morrison, February 2006 ---------- AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL KOPPY: Front Porch Music, Dixie, and Why "Standard" Songs Are Not What You Think By Jane Morrison Jane Morrison: I want to ask about the songs on "Red River Redux." It's a wide mix of material. Michael Koppy: [laughs] I think we kind of staked out a big piece of real estate, but that's the point. JM: There's even a song in French. MK: Yes. But "Je T'appartiens" is emblematic of how I approach music generally. Most

folks know the song from its English-language title -- JM: "Let it Be Me." MK: Right. The Everly Brothers and just about everyone else in popular music over the past fifty years has sung it. Bob Dylan, Nina Simone, Frank Sinatra, you name it -- even James Brown. I always really liked the tune, the melody, but I also always thought the lyrics were kind of insipid -- not very well written, to be frank. "I bless the day I found you. I want to stay a-round you"? Rather banal, no? So when I discovered purely by chance that the song was actually written in French, by Pierre Delanoe and Gilbert Becaud -- JM: "Monsieur 10,000 Volts." MK: Right. You knew that? Becaud's nickname, "Monsieur 100,000 Volts." Have you ever actually heard his recordings though? Gives a whole new level of meaning to the term "over-the-top." Wowie. Anyway, I like the French lyrics much better. And since I speak French -- not well, but adequately -- I thought it would be a great opportunity to actually finish creating a proper presentation for the song. JM: A "proper presentation"? MK: Yeah, right -- what does that mean, huh? Okay, you've got me started. A song, to me, has a central thesis, a "take" on an experience, or a feeling, or life -- whatever. But all too often, the exposition of that central thesis loses steam, or gets derailed, or just plain isn't at all served by the other aspect of the song: the music isn't served by the lyrics, or the lyrics aren't served by the music. Usually, it's the lyrics that don't hold up, for one reason or another. But sometimes it's the music. Here, I wanted -- stumbled upon -- a way to perform "Let It Be Me" without being chained to lyrics I couldn't buy or support. Great! But even here, though the French lyrics were better, the song still was a bit facile, and so film director Dominique Benichetti and I just took it apart and reconstructed it. I threw in a passing chord in the title line that helped seal each verse, and together we polished and added some lyrics. I maintain this is a much better song -- a much better presentation of this song -- than has come before. And if it's not "better," what we've done is come up with something that at least has independent intrinsic integrity. JM: Do you put a lot of study and thought into each song? MK: Abso-damn-lutely. Yes, especially when changing lyrics. When Joan Baez [in the song "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down" -- ed.] changes the line "There goes Robert E. Lee" into "There goes the Robert E. Lee" -- turning the Confederate general into the danged river boat! -- that makes no sense at all, and just drives me nuts [laughs]. I mean, to me, music is very serious stuff. Even things intended to be nonsense are designed and written. They're not just derived, in whole, extemporaneously. I want songs I perform to stand as complete pieces, works that have been thought out and stand up intellectually as well as emotionally. JM: Let me ask about the opening cut, which combines three short historic versions of the song "Wildwood

Flower," along with your own instrumental version. Why do you start the album that way? MK: To show that my approach is part of a long tradition of adapting songs. In so many, many cases, there's a long backstory, a clear progression of steps, that got a song to where it is in our present consciousness. We open the CD with this "short ride through history" to serve as an illustration of what is coming up. It's not a concept album, really, but there is a particular conception throughout the record that requires exposure before moving on. "Wildwood Flower" is by A.P.Carter -- JM: -- of the Carter Family -- MK: -- right, but A.P. Carter actually should never even have been issued a copyright on "Wildwood Flower"! Yet he was, and the song, as "Wildwood Flower," has made millions of dollars in royalties since 1928. JM: Why shouldn't he have been issued the copyright? MK: Because the song is clearly, absolutely and inarguably, simply a variant of J.P. Webster and Maud Irving's "I'll Twine Mid the Ringlets," which was composed and copyrighted in 1860, renewed in 1888, and fell out of copyright in 1902. And legally, once a song has fallen out of copyright it is forever in the public domain. Period. Yet despite this, Carter got his copyright. JM: You've obviously dug into some deep history there. MK: I did a lot of research on this song, so much that the Library of Congress actually asked me for it because now I'm kind of the expert on it. It may be a song that everyone has heard and thinks they know, but they don't. Some musicologists even contend that Webster and Irving were not the original authors, and that the song is based on "The Pale Amaranthus," circa 1800. I'm not sure I agree, but I included that supposed antecedent, along with the other two versions, in the album's first cut, so the listener can hear the evolution. JM: Sounds like you spent quite a bit of time with your academic hat on to make this album. MK: It's fascinating to me, how songs and song ideas evolve and take shape. But -- and here's where I part company with the academics -- sometimes a so-called folk song does have a definite, absolute point of initial creation. The "handed down from one to another for centuries" clich diminishes the man or woman who came up with the very first need to put the words together and compose the music. It is an original creation. What really kills the academics -- because they're often just hopeless romantics at heart -- is when a song was clearly originally a commercial enterprise. They like to buy and promulgate the whole "lost in the mists of time" hokum for every folk song. Sorry, folks, usually there really was a single person who started this or that train, and sometimes that person was just creating it to make a buck! Even original compositions, such as my own "One Great Mornin'", are obviously inspired at least in part by other songs, which could be considered antecedents. There's a multitude of ideas that coalesce and become the central thesis that is

hammered and gets proper presentation. It's like what a director does with a script. JM: "One Great Mornin (the South's Gonna Rise Again)" is, to me, is the most interesting song on the album. It's panoramic and unique. MK: Long title, eh? But thanks. It was intended to be panoramic, to address larger issues than just the immediate and day-to-day stuff. No flinching, no sentiment on its weasly own, no sentiment without foundation. And I do believe that the South will rise again -- one hopes sooner rather than later. JM: I don't think I've ever heard a left-wing Confederate call-to-arms. MK: That's good, yeah -- "a left-wing Confederate call-to-arms." Well that's what it is. And I like that I don't have to explain anything about it, it's all right there and speaks for itself. JM: It sure does. I think you're going to make both a lot of friends and a lot of enemies. MK: Good -- on both counts. I'm not afraid to stand up and be counted. Since little-bitty Ronnie Reagan got elevated to president and exalted as some kind of weird mystic visionary, we have lost so much in this country, just so much -- and the South probably got the worst of the social back-tracking and the rampant greed, because that's where changes were needed most. JM: Tell me about some of the other songs here, because almost every one comes off as something entirely fresh. What about "I'm So Glad"? MK: Most folks probably only know the Cream version, although it was written by an old blues guy, Skip James. It's a song that also really fit my style and sensibility musically, but I didn't quite understand it lyrically. What's this "I don't know what to do"? but yet "I'm so glad"? What -- I'm miserable but I'm glad about it? This isn't gibberish, it's a song lyric, written by one person to express a situation in which he finds himself -- don't forget that. Then I almost inadvertently found out that the words were idiomatic, that saying "don't know what to do" did work with "I'm so glad" -- which doesn't at all sound right -- because the "don't know what to do" back then and there meant actually the opposite, kind of like today saying someone is "bad" meaning he's good. So I worked on the song, and admittedly it's a very simple thesis: she had caused the guy a lot of pain, she's gone, and ain't life great again because of her leaving! But now it makes sense to a contemporary listener. And after overcoming that hurdle, I could take off on it musically. My live version can last three times as long. Just as self-indulgent as Eric Clapton's live Cream records! [laughs] JM: Why include "Dixie"? That's a rather gutsy move, given that it's come to be seen as a racist anthem. MK: Yeah, I know. And of course, in reality, the song has nothing at all to do with the right-wing bigotry with which it's now associated. Sadly, that fact is irrelevant to how the song is perceived today, of course. You know, most people are shocked to discover that "Dixie" was actually Abraham Lincoln's favorite song! JM: Really? MK: When he got word that Lee had

surrendered, he asked the band serenading him to play it. But I digress JM: Yes, but theyre all interesting digressions. MK: My feeling about "Dixie" is to save it from the reactionary scumbags that have already claimed the Confederate battle flag as their own. Actually, that is fine by me, as that flag -- the one everyone thinks of as the "Confederate flag" -- wasn't the national flag of the Confederate States of America at all. It was a battle flag. It's like mistaking today's Marine Corps banner for the American flag! But that's what happened, and okay, fine. Because I don't want or have any use for that so-called Confederate flag. But if we let the right wingers have "Dixie" too, well what's next? Pretty soon I'll have to stop eating pecan pie and grits and hush puppies! "Dixie" has a great tune, workable if somewhat less-than-impressive lyrics, and my presentation of it is a nostalgic one certainly, but neither imperial nor loaded. Good. JM: What about "Leavin' On Her Mind"? MK: I've no idea where or when I first heard that song. Years and years ago. Don't really want to know how it got to me -- or rather, I'm interested in that, but not in hearing it. It's gone a long ways since then, and so, fine. Interesting, maybe, that with all the care and research I put into so many songs that one like this I've an actual aversion to hearing in its recorded editions, huh? [laughs] JM: Your version of "You Are My Sunshine" is quite strikingly different than what people accept as the traditional version. MK: I actually sang this arrangement for Louisiana Governor Jimmy Davis, who is credited with writing it, some years before he died. JM: How did that happen? MK: A car pulled up in front of Ashmore's Store in Tallahassee, where I spent a good deal of my youth playing guitar, and a couple of old guys got out and wandered over. I was sitting there and one of them asked if I knew "You Are My Sunshine." I played it for him, and he said "I wrote that song." You know, as a matter of fact he actually didn't, but that's another history lesson. Anyway, he said he'd never heard a version like mine, and he really liked it because everyone always sings it like it's a happy, upbeat song when in fact it's kind of sad. Which it is -- the singer is desperate to keep the girl, but knows it's all up to her and there's nothing he can do. "Oh, Susanna" has a similar sentiment except she's already gone -- and probably doesn't even really remember the guy. JM: "Loose Talk" is another one of those forgotten pop gems, here with your own stamp on it. MK: That and "Above and Beyond" are just for fun. Nothing more. Both were sung by Buck Owens, a man who's influence on me is really profound. Buck's music and songs just epitomize good times, and I hope he likes these covers. [Sadly, Owens died six days before the release of "Red River Redux," having never heard either of Koppy's versions -- ed.] JM: Your version of "Rockefeller Blues" is quite simply played, in comparison to other cuts. MK: It was the first

song I ever learned. Well not the first. Every kid has to go through the phase of learning this or that rock riff or pop song, but the first song I really ever really took seriously and assimilated. In open G. JM: "Whoopie Ti-Yi-Yo" is also a reworked "traditional" song. MK: I added a whole third part to it that's new. I also changed "lop off their tails" to "mark them for sale" because I don't like the image of cruelty to animals. My vegetarianism revealing itself, I guess. I also just like the loping, easy-going and "throw-away" feeling of what should probably be a yodeling refrain. JM: You don't yodel? MK: Never really tried. I don't think yodeling is something you can really get away with these days. I can really appreciate Jimmy Rodgers [1897-1933, Rodgers aka "The Blue Yodeler" or "The Singing Brakeman" is often called the Father of Country Music -- ed.] or Patsy Montana [1914-1996, the first woman to sell a million records with "I Want to be a Cowboy's Sweetheart" -- ed.] but in my opinion it's just too removed from contemporary culture to not inadvertently detract from the material, except in special cases. Doug Green of Riders in the Sky is an exceptional yodeler, of course, but they are a very unusual act. JM: Let's talk about "Corrina, Corrina." MK: That's a fun one, isn't it? Emmett Goodman, a good friend of mine in Tallahassee many years ago, and I used to play that song very differently. It worked, but these are lyrics which can be set to a lot of different ideas. And this is one that hit me much later, after Emmett died mysteriously. JM: Mysteriously? MK: Killed. They found him out on the streets one morning, dead, and never even really investigated. Just another poor indigent black man without family or status. Kind of like what happened after the delta bluesman Robert Johnson died. Johnson was clearly murdered by a jealous husband -- everyone knows that and knew that then -- but the authorities didn't investigate because they simply didn't care. That was in 1938, but things hadn't changed all that much by 1970 or so in places like Tallahassee. I actually was the guy they took down to the morgue to identify Emmett's body. They buried him in potter's field -- that's the name they gave to the county plot outside of town for indigents and vagabonds, almost all of them black. I found out where he was buried and made a headstone from a bunch of four-by-fours I laminated together and planted it over his grave. It was the only one out of maybe seventy to a hundred out there that got a marker. I've been back a few times over the years, but now can't find any of it, but it was there south of Tallahassee near a place called Five Points. JM: So Emmett contributed to the song? MK: Yes, the lyrics are the ones Emmett and I sang, but now put to a simple G, E minor, C, and D progression. For folks who don't know music, that's the basic chord pattern for just about every 50s doo-wop song there ever was. But it also seemed to work for "Corrina,

Corrina." I'm really happy with it, though purists might not like it. JM: Music is a living, changing thing MK: Exactly. What's most important to me is the work as a whole; an intrinsic, stand-alone-without-need-for-extraneous-explanation, whole. I'm not interested in "the way it's always been done" or "the way it's supposed to be." The present era isn't any kind of apotheosis in music or song, the way most people tend to believe, in my eyes anyway. There's a natural tendency to think that art forms constantly evolve upwards, that they become better or more refined and complete. But I assert that -- particularly in popular music -- that's not at all the case. To me, the twentieth century wasn't any kind of culmination, it was more of an aberration. JM: An aberration? MK: Yes. For a zillion years songs could change, lyrics could be added or taken away, tunes could be played many different ways. But it was the industrial revolution and the onset of the idea of intellectual property that killed that. All of a sudden songs got set in concrete. There was only one true and correct way to play or sing this or that song. You encounter this all the time, and it's of course especially prevalent with contemporary songs, songs that were created today or yesterday. Even a new arrangement of a contemporary hit song is seen as a radical act. And because most such arrangements don't really work, that general belief is exacerbated. But look at how just in the past few years that strangle-hold of conformity and written-in-stone ethos is being shattered. Things like sampling and re-mixing; alternative mixes and mash-ups -- that kind of thing is re-awakening music generally. JM: It drives the lawyers and record companies crazy. MK: It sure does! It drives the legal people batty and challenges the very foundations of the record companies, the music industry. And good for that! Music is an organic, living celebration; a cry from the heart. It is a biological imperative. There isn't a culture on Earth that doesn't have it's own music. Sure, it's also people's bread and butter -- I'm an absolute believer in royalties and dealing with rights and licensing and copyright. Anyone who figures they should just be able to do what they want -- that they have some sort of god-given right to expropriate what they want without responsibility -- is an arrogant pirate. There's folks making money off songs I cover, and good for them and their families. But I've rarely ever met a serious musician who didn't agree there wasn't a need -- wasn't a responsibility! -- for others to take their work forward, so long as the clear original intent isn't violated. And that's where arguments and lawyers and critics, and the reactions of everyone who ever hears the variations, come in. JM: You mean that there is no "final word." MK: Exactly. There is a legal "final word" -- and you deal with and respect that -- but there's no esthetic final word. I mean -- and here again I note A.P.Carter's inappropriate receipt of

copyright for "Wildwood Flower" -- there is always an economic raison d'etre in music. And trying to divorce so-called pure questions of art from quotidian matters of livelihood is simply impossible. Even John Lomax, one of the most revered preservers of American traditional music, hastened to copyright folk tunes he came across in his research. Did he write them? Of course not. But hey, you've got to make a living, huh? And an intelligent artist can still add to the value of the experience of that song. JM: Which leads me to the CD's title cut, "Red River Valley." MK: Here is a perfect example of what I'm talking about. Here the questions are solely esthetic, because it's entirely in the public domain, so we can look at it and what I've done with it without concerning ourselves with extraneous red herrings. Perhaps someone thinks my "Red River Valley" is too radical and doesn't strike him or her as true to the original. Or, in this case, true to the "textbook" versions we've all known since childhood. While that reaction is certainly of interest to me in individual cases, I assert with some confidence that my reworking is actually both a legitimate polishing of what we all know from campfire cookouts as well as a return to the central idea that propelled the original vision. Look, the lyrics to the "Red River Valley" we all know are somewhat contradictory and even evasive. My questions were "What is this really about?" and "What is actually being said here?" And out on the front porch, over the years, letting the song ferment into its essentials as I played guitar and played with it, what came into form was what you hear on the CD. Maybe it doesn't work for you, maybe it does. But it does have independent integrity, and it is both consistent and, I believe, evocative. JM: In closing, let me ask you about your guitar playing and how you build a song musically. How did you learn to play? MK: I first picked it up as a teenager, pretty much for the same reason every guy starts out: to impress girls. I never took any formal lessons. Folks would just kind of show each other stuff, and you'd learn by watching and practicing and maybe asking an occasional question. JM: Did you have any truly important influences? MK: Well, anyone who picks the way I do has to have been exposed to Mississippi John Hurt and Merle Travis. I mean those guys were the pioneers -- or at least the "Johnny Appleseeds" -- of it all. JM: Did you ever play Top-40 and commercial pop music? Or did you play the same kind of songs as you do today? MK: Yes and no. For one thing I wasn't writing my own stuff at all. That really only came much, much later, which is maybe good because experience in life gives you more authority, and some actual wisdom. Back then, I'd try to copy exactly what I heard on radio or records, though I was never all that good at it. But otherwise, yeah, I'd pick up this or that popular song -- whatever everyone else was playing, Top 40, whatever -- and bang away at it. When you're new,

and starting an instrument, anything you learn is a step in the right direction. Mistakes, especially, help. JM: Mistakes help? MK: Sure. I always joke that the best way to learn to play the way I do is to just get a guitar, a front porch, and a pound of marijuana, because then, as you practice this or that picking style or song, every time you make a mistake, instead of accepting that it was a mistake, you're so bombed you delude yourself into thinking it's something added -- a brilliant improvisation! I'm kidding, of course -- and yet so many of the licks and ideas I incorporate into my own playing were initially mistakes that sounded intriguing. The way I use my index finger to "strum" in the middle of a finger-picked train wreck of strings -- it comes up way above my palm in the middle of the riff so ends up strumming downward on the whole fretboard, all the strings -- was an inadvertent mistake one day a long time ago. Same with all the pull-offs and slides. Yeah, you can learn this stuff from books and lessons, obviously, but in my experience they all -- all -- came from just fooling around and playing. They arose from within. JM: So what advice would you give to those who like your music and want to try their hand at it? MK: The very most important things I'd say are two: number one, turn off the damn TV. And two, when you're in a car, don't listen to the damn radio. Sing! Play harmonica -- which is what I do on long drives -- or think up words to song ideas you have. Don't be a passive consumer -- a taker of all the stupid, insipid crap pushed on us by the heavy-handed and un-imaginative twits at Disney and Fox and Clear Channel. We're all part of a biological tradition, if you will -- a biological imperative -- and we need to create, not re-create, not just purchase and accept. Make your own music, build your own songs, improve on what's been given to us -- the music we've created and the world we've inherited. JM: Thanks, Michael. MK. Thank you. People who are interested in Bob Dylan Leo Kottke Doc Watson should consider this download.