

Got a driveway? 'Camper Van Connolly' will bring the concert to you

By **Stuart Munro** Globe correspondent, Updated May 12, 2021, 5:40 p.m.



Singer-songwriter Kevin Connolly and his camper van. LIZA CONNOLLY

Veteran local singer-songwriter Kevin Connolly had played at least one gig a month for the past 30 years until the onset of the pandemic in March 2020 brought live performance to a screeching halt. With the abundance of time suddenly available to him, he did what many of his fellow musical artists did: He made a record, his 11th, “Invisible,” which came out last November. “I wasn’t sure I was ever going to put another original record out,” he says during a recent phone conversation. “And then I got to the point where, well, what else am I going to do right now?”

That presented its own challenges. Connolly had always worked with a producer; now he had to do it on his own, which he did with the help of that source of all knowledge, the Internet. He could not record with other musicians, either, so he “flew in tracks from other people all over the world” and put all of the parts together. It was a different sort of collaboration.

What resulted was probably the most personal album he’s ever made, Connolly says. Songs such as “Lost” reflect the pandemic without being directly about it, and others address matters — his marriage of 25-plus years (“I Go Where You Go”), the changes that come with kids growing up and moving out (“Kitchen Walls”) — that he avers he never would have been willing to broach before. But with the record in the can, the same question arose: What now?

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The virtual concert gambit didn't appeal to him. "I never could figure out the Facebook Live stuff. I had a lot of friends who did them and it just made me feel weird. It seemed kind of depressing, so I sat the whole thing out." But then he had another idea.

"By coincidence I bought a van just as the cloud of COVID was closing in, off of a musician buddy of mine down in Austin named Ray Bonneville," Connolly says. By the time he got the van home to Lexington from Texas, "the whole world had changed." Months later, as he was contemplating his next move after the release of "Invisible," it occurred to him that as the owner of a camper van, "I can just put my PA in there, bring a big long orange extension cord, plug it in and away we go."

With warmer weather arriving and things getting safer, that is exactly what he's going to do. He's dubbed the notion "Camper Van Connolly," a sly nod to the absurdist moniker of indie band Camper Van Beethoven, and he's named the series of tour dates he's booking "the driveway concerts" ([his website](#) lists other possible locations: frontyard, backyard, boat ramp, police station parking lot, empty pool, highway underpass, abandoned fairground, airplane hangar, desert sanctuary, canyon river bed, low tide clam flat . . .).

It's a simple concept, according to Connolly. Come up with 20 or so people to join you, set a date and arrange payment, and he'll show up in his van for an outdoor show. To date he has 10 shows booked, ranging from Richmond, Va., to Ogunquit, Maine, with a bunch more in the works.

Camper Van Connolly has a date lined up in Rick Simpson's front yard in Rochester, N.Y., at the end of June. Simpson, a veteran house-concert presenter, first saw Connolly play in Boston several years ago — at Johnny D's, he thinks — and has had him do one house concert since then. "We're not quite ready to move back indoors, and I knew Kevin's idea would work," Simpson says. "I have a relatively large e-mail list, so I sent out an e-mail and probably twice as many people responded in a positive manner as we could possibly fit in. Over the years, we get the same people coming to our concerts, so it's kind of become like a big family."

Connolly will go where people want him to go — have van, will travel — and he'll play the sort of gig that people want him to play. If they want him to put on his singer-songwriter hat and essentially do an outdoor version of a house concert, a listening show, he'll do that. If they want something looser and more electric, he's happy to oblige (and, if the distance isn't too great, he'll bring his band for those willing to pay for that). He'll do his version of a covers show (which he calls "Mule Variations"), or a set each of originals and covers. Or he's happy to just read the room (or the lawn) and follow that vibe.

"I like the fact that this fits into other people's lives and what they want to do with the occasion, whether to have it be really casual or have it be like a concert thing."

Whichever way it goes, Connolly insists on appropriate safety protocols.

"Being in somebody's driveway is going to be new and unusual," both for him and the folks he'll be playing for. "People are dying to do something social and have people in their frontyard or backyard and to hear live music."

And, he says, "It's going to get me playing again. That's a really good feeling."

For more information on Camper Van Connolly, go to kevinconnolly.com/contact.

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