

ERIK KOSKINEN

Born in Fort Collins, Colorado, raised in Northern Michigan and upper New York state, then living in urban Minneapolis and now, rural Minnesota, **Erik Koskinen** grew up with the rhythms of weather, factory towns, and farmlands. Koskinen worked in construction for years as he developed his music career, and he now resides on a farm near where he owns a recording studio in Cleveland, Minnesota, population 717.

Koskinen's *Burning the Deal* is steeped in American roots traditions. Of *Burning the Deal*, he says, "It's not only *Americana* music. I learned how to play blues music. I learned how to play country music, and how to play folk, bluegrass, jazz, whatever. I learned how to play *American* music."

The nine songs share a stripped-down, almost naked quality, but complexities lie just under their skin.

Part of that depth can be attributed to the top-notch players **Koskinen** recruited: Greg Leisz (Jackson Browne, Beck, Joni Mitchell) on lap and pedal steel and mandolin, plus the rhythm section of drummer Jay Bellerose (Alison Krauss and Robert Plant, Willie Nelson) and bassist Jennifer Condos (Don Henley, Marc Cohn, Ray Lamontagne). As for how he managed to gather them together — twice — for recording sessions in Ojai, California, **Koskinen** quips, "In the music biz, you're always one person away from knowing the president."

His connection was guitarist, co-producer and mentor Bernie Larsen, an L.A. veteran whose credits range from Browne and Melissa Etheridge to Public Enemy. The two met after Larsen moved to Houghton, Michigan, to be near his aging father. Larsen heard the 15-year-old playing at a coffeehouse and invited him to perform at the club he was opening and record in his studio. **Koskinen** already played guitar, clarinet, and oboe, but Larsen, who'd picked with Ry Cooder, played in David Lindley's El Rayo-X band, and recorded with reggae legends, helped Koskinen expand his repertoire. He also taught **Koskinen** how to find a song's essence, put texture around it — and more importantly, to leave out what it doesn't need.

Burning the Deal has a moody, shadowy vibe — an occasionally unsettling sense that evil lurks a little too close by. You can hear its murky threat in the slinky, bayou-drenched minor-key drone thrumming under Leisz's mandolin notes on "Down in the Factory," or in the gut-bucket-blues meets second-line-syncopation of "Sell Out" — both of which would have been at home in a "True Blood" episode — or in the quiet whisper of "Crazy," in which **Koskinen** sings, "It's easy going crazy but it's hard staying sane enough."

If something wicked this way comes, it might take the form of the protagonist in "Gun," so down and out, he's driven to commit a desperate act — and receives a punishment far more serious than the crime. It's loosely based on the saga of a high-school friend whose third strike sent him to prison for life, **Koskinen** reveals, adding that the character in "Down in the Factory" — where they manufacture jealousy, apathy, gluttony, and anxiety — could be that guy's brother.

A gently brushed snare and haunting, Hawaiian-inflected steel notes convey a contemplative tone in the atmospheric blues of "Losers Like Me and You," in which **Koskinen** addresses "how inept we can be at relationships." His conversational delivery on this one recalls James McMurtry, but the line, "you had the urge for goin'" reveals an even deeper influence.

"I totally stole it from Tom Rush," **Koskinen** admits. "My dad had all the Tom Rush records when I was a kid." Chuck Berry, another early influence, gets a similar nod in "Darlin'".

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Koskinen was born to a mother from Wichita Falls, Texas, and a dad from Helsinki, Finland, and split time between them. His parents took the kids to festivals, exposing him to a broad cross-section of music — and inspiring his travels in search of like-minded players. **Koskinen** developed another formative influence as well: singing cowboys.

“I always pretended I was a cowboy,” he reveals. “My dad and I watched Roy Rogers and Gene Autry movies every Saturday and Sunday morning, and of course there was Hank Williams.” After hanging around and playing music in New England **Koskinen** left because, “Nobody played country music up there. There were a couple of folk musicians I really liked, but nobody, *nobody* was playing country music in Vermont,” he recalls.

While working in a music store in Michigan, he acquired a steel guitar, which inspired him to write songs based on country tunings and feeling. Then a friend, Molly Maher, in Minneapolis asked him to come sit in with her band. “They were basically country players. I’d play a song and her band would come in and they played it like it was supposed to be played,” he recalls. “And I said, ‘I gotta move here. They can play my kind of music.’”

Maybe “my kind of music” is the kind that requires patience. Nowhere is that quality more evident than on “Ordinary Fool,” a gorgeous, slow shuffle that unwinds gently, its longing ache a gradual dawning.

“That was the third take of the first song we recorded. The first two takes they learned the song. Leisz didn’t even have the bridge. The chords aren’t super-intuitive. We got to the bridge he played through it like it was his twentieth time, and then he played the solo and I almost started to cry. We got to the end of that take and everybody looked at everybody and said, ‘We should go listen to that.’” They did. And Bellarose said, “Man, that song’s so good, it plays itself.”

Koskinen calls that experience “the pinnacle of my recording career.” Another great moment includes playing his second-ever festival, at 19, and being invited by one of the headliners — Tom Rush — to play harmonica on the encore. It’s the one instrument he no longer plays; he says gave it up when he, “found a good band and heard too many good harmonica players.”

But **Koskinen** plays everything on two tracks of *Burning the Deal*: “Crazy” and “Pony to Ride,” a lo-fi back-porch blues for which percussion consists mainly of brushes on a cardboard box.

After the Ojai sessions, **Koskinen** retreated to his studio, a former hardware store in Cleveland, Minnesota, minutes from the farm he and his author girlfriend share. She’s the inspiration behind “Big Plane,” a from-the-road love song that evokes the lonesome sound of big-sky country, without mimicking it. That’s intentional, **Koskinen** says.

“I could have made a country record, but I don’t want to make a retro-sounding record,” he explains. “I like old music. I like old sounds, and I play old instruments through old amps. But I’m not trying to sound like a Chuck Berry record or a Waylon Jennings record.”

No, **Koskinen** is not trying to sound like anyone else at all. He’s one of a kind. An American original.

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