

# Kevin So: Multi-genre singer-songwriter displays heart and “S.O.U.L” on latest release

By Mary Ellen Gambon



Kevin So was described on iTunes as, “The best singer/songwriter you (may) have never heard of.”

In some ways, this statement is totally correct. You may not know him by name, but he has co-written music

with legendary blues artists such as Keb’ Mo’, Shemekia Copeland, Ronnie Baker Brooks and Ana Popovic. His songs have been recorded by Keb’ Mo’ and India.Arie. He has toured with Keb’ Mo’ as well as Crystal Bowersox of “American Idol” fame.



With Keb’ Mo’ / New York October 2011

Photo by John Mazlish

So’s musical career over the past three decades cannot be put into a neat category. It runs the gamut from blues to folk, smooth jazz to R&B, country to pop in a unique mix that is heartfelt and passionate. Add to that romantic ballads, some politically-charged songs and reflections on his being a first-generation Chinese American, and you have a deeply personal experience that connects with audiences from Boston to Paris.

The one thread that weaves all of So’s music together is soul. “S.O.U.L.” is the title of his latest release, which just came out last month. It is an acronym for “Speaking of Universal



Language,” as music is the one language that can connect people of all generations and backgrounds.

“This album explains and describes love, loss, breakup and reconciliation,” So said during a reflective interview on his latest venture and his experiences that have led him to this point.

One of his favorite songs on “S.O.U.L” is “Forever For Awhile”:

I hope you grab your dreams  
With both hands hanging on  
I hope the world out there  
Is giving you what you want  
And you throw your arms wide open  
Embrace it like a child  
I hope you live  
Forever for awhile



The Bitter End, NYC 2005 / Photo by John Mazlish

“In a sense, forget about the lyrics for a moment,” So said. “The music I really feel extremely proud of. The music itself is something I work meticulously at, so that, even if you didn’t understand English, I hope people really enjoy the music and the sound and the things I manifest.

“I never like to follow any particular formula,” he continued. “I’m really proud of the fact that, like ‘Countryside,’ it’s very organic. All of the instruments are actually played. It’s as honest as possible, and it has a dynamic feel to it.”

So described the “four food groups on his albums” as 1. family matters, 2. social commentary, 3. R&B and gospel roots and 4. folk, blues and country influences. The depth of his

musical range is why *Recording Magazine* called him, “the Amy Tan of the singer/songwriter world.” Each of So’s albums has a song about family life, but none has been as moving as “Going Down Swinging,” a tribute to his 80-year-old mother.

But it goes so fast  
Yeah nothing lasts  
Kids are grown and out the door  
One’s a preacher man  
And the other one is  
Back on tour

The highly-charged “American” takes a swipe at the current political culture in a tongue in cheek way. The song was well received at a packed CD release party on June 28 at The Burren in Somerville, as was his two-hour performance of old and new So classics.

“This Guitar” and “One and Done” pay tribute to his early roots as well as his Nashville influences. The latter was co-penned by Pam Belford, who has written songs for George Strait. This album is unique because it is a fan-funded project. So started a fundraising campaign on Indiegogo.com, which has earned more than \$4,700 so far. He is currently hoping to earn more money to produce t-shirts.

He described this recording as the “bookend” to his last release, “Countryside.” So recorded that after he moved to Nashville and immersed himself in the folk and country music scene.

Burren Backroom, Somerville, MA June 2019  
Photo by Neale Eckstein



“‘Countryside’ explored the first four years of my apprenticeship, if you will, in Nashville,” So said. “‘S.O.U.L.’ goes into the last four to six



Uncle Calvin’s Coffeehouse, Dallas, TX September 2016

years, with more of an R&B flavor.”

So said his earliest musical influences are Motown masters Michael Jackson, Stevie Wonder and Lionel Richie. Their influences are felt in his R&B tracks such as “Improvise,” “Just You Just Me” and “You Keep Running” on “S.O.U.L.” So even plays the harmonica, as well as piano, guitar and banjo.

So knows how to touch the heartstrings as well, “I Got Angels” and “Win Back Your Love,” a tribute to the love song genre as well as a ballad, are prime examples of his skill.

As a child, Billy Joel was the first person who inspired So to sing, followed by Lionel Richie, with his prowess on the piano and lush balladry.

“The earliest recollection I have is hearing ‘Just the Way You Are’ at about age nine or ten years old,” he said. “In my own head, I could follow along and sing it perfectly – everything about the register, the intonation. It was like a secret skill, a superpower.

“I knew it was something I could do, and it was fun,” he continued. “I wasn’t thinking about a career then. I was just falling in love with music in general.”

Growing up in the era of “Solid Gold” and at the beginning of the music video era, So became impressed with Richie’s style, first on the song “Easy” by The Commodores.

“I remember that classic piano intro, and then that voice coming in,” he said. “I connected to his temperament, the way he was conversational.”

So also was inspired by singer/songwriters like Elton John and Barry Manilow, who played

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piano and had showmanship skills.

While at the prestigious Boston Latin School, So tried out for the Market Players Cabaret, sponsored by Orangina. He was one of 16 teens chosen for a series of summer performance workshops, which led to the troupe performing in Faneuil Hall and New York City.

“Every day we would learn different skills,” he said. “We would have a juggler come in one day, then a slapstick comedian the next. It helped me come out of my shell. Then I went back to school and joined the Show Choir.”

At age 17, So recorded his first album in a Brighton studio. “It was in the same room where I recorded the soundtrack album for the Market Players Cabaret,” he said.

When he returned from college for a summer break after freshman year, So tried out in a talent competition run by the legendary Maurice Starr, who discovered New Edition and New Kids on the Block.

“I got on the show in 1990 at the Strand Theater, at the same time New Kids of the Block was really big,” he said. “I came in second, but I came in second to the one who won the whole contest, so I felt a taste of stardom. The Boston Globe did a write up about it, and there’s a picture of Joey McIntyre on one side of me and Maurice Starr on the other.”

But the contest led to another break – an audition on “Big Break” in Los Angeles. “It was like the urban version of ‘Star Search,’” he said. “I got a call-back that I was going to be on the show in Hollywood, and Natalie Cole was going to be the host. That was going to be my two minutes of fame. I came in third. At that point I decided I was not going to do the pop thing.”

So juggled performing with his pursuit of a piano degree in jazz studies.

“To get my degree, I was in the room eight hours a day practicing, having this other-worldly relationship with chords,” he said.

From there, So has been from New York City to Nashville with tours in Europe, expanding his repertoire. He has toured with perhaps his biggest influence, Keb’ Mo’, leading the IMPCE Blues and Brass Band.

He also has written and produced two full-length musicals. The first is the semi-autobiographical “Great Wall,” which saw productions in Seattle, New York and California in recent years. The second is the forthcoming movie/musical “Cooking for Two,” set in Hong Kong.

So wants to pass on all that he has learned throughout his music career. He has been invited to speak and perform at Bunker Hill Community College in April 2020. And has received similar invitations from other colleges, including MIT, Harvard, NYU, Babson, Rutgers, Columbia, Fordham and Tidewater Community College in Norfolk, VA.

For now, So plans on promoting “S.O.U.L.” – with his heart and soul.

For more information, go to [www.kevinso.com](http://www.kevinso.com)

Here are also some links for folks to check out the new album.

iTunes  
[music.apple.com/us/album/s-o-u-l-speaking-of-universal-language/1466490973](https://music.apple.com/us/album/s-o-u-l-speaking-of-universal-language/1466490973)

Amazon  
[amazon.com/gp/product/B07SKQ27T4/ref=dm\\_ws\\_sp\\_ps\\_dp](https://amazon.com/gp/product/B07SKQ27T4/ref=dm_ws_sp_ps_dp)

Spotify:  
[open.spotify.com/album/349THJMVhFeXrhsVLx-GT4B](https://open.spotify.com/album/349THJMVhFeXrhsVLx-GT4B)

Social media:  
[Facebook.com/KevinSoMusic](https://Facebook.com/KevinSoMusic)  
[Instagram.com/KevinSoMonk](https://Instagram.com/KevinSoMonk)  
[Twitter.com/TweetKevinSo](https://Twitter.com/TweetKevinSo)  
[YouTube.com/KevinSo](https://YouTube.com/KevinSo)

See Kevin AUGUST 29th at the CONDON BAND SHELL in Medford, MA  
<https://cacheinmedford.org/event/condon-shell-concert-kevin-so/>