

Old Crow Medicine Show delivers "Remedy" and the key to life



Peter Cooper, pcooper@tennessean.com

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(Photo: Andrea Behrends)



Ketch Secor was a first-grader.

Most of us were, too, at some point. But Secor's first-grade year was better than ours. He attended St. Louis Community School, where Vincent Price and fiddling, banjo-playing songwriter John Hartford had studied. One day, Hartford showed up and explained the key to life to Secor's class. Secor was the only one who got it.

"He had his bowler hat on, and he had a banjo, and he played and danced," says Secor, who fronts America's most successful string band, [Old Crow Medicine Show](#). "It was amazing. I got home and told my mom, 'I saw a man with a banjo at school today. I know what I want to be when I grow up.' She said, 'What, son?' I said, 'An actor.' "

Secor was young, so he misunderstood the key to life at first. Later, he got it straight: "The fiddle and the banjo will prevail." That's why Secor made a point to meet with 40 elementary students at East Nashville [Hope Exchange's Summer Program](#) at St. Ann's Episcopal Church this month: to explain the whole deal.

"I've been certain of this since John Hartford came to my first-grade assembly hall and buck-danced on a board," he says, talking in his management's offices before heading to St. Ann's. "These kids need to know."

Even a cursory listen to country radio says Secor is wrong. There, fiddles and banjos are background instruments, consigned to secondary roles. Electronic beats and electric guitars prevail.



Secor's key to life remains, "The fiddle and banjo will prevail." (Photo: Peter Cooper / The Tennessean)

That's all transitory, in Secor's view. From a historical perspective, the game is already won, and whatever is happening on the radio is just a garbage-time basket in a contest where fiddles and banjos are already up by 40 points with 40 seconds to play.

Old Crow Medicine Show was at the forefront of a populist acoustic music movement that thrives without country radio support and that includes blockbuster touring acts [Mumford & Sons](#) and [The Avett Brothers](#).

OCMS's "Wagon Wheel" sold more than 500,000 copies without ever being played on the radio, and [Darius Rucker's](#) cover of the song sold millions. And Old Crow's new album — the fiddle and banjo-happy "Remedy" — out Tuesday — includes "Sweet Amarillo," a song that is hooky enough to find favor with the masses, if the masses are made aware.

The band has made a big-budget video for "Sweet Amarillo," and that one will likely get some airplay on country video networks. If it gets a lot of airplay, mainstream FM stations might feel pressure to add it to their playlists. If that happens, Old Crow might

have a big-time radio hit. If that doesn't happen, Secor's key to life remains, "The fiddle and the banjo will prevail."

History lesson

"One of my favorite places to play is the [Grand Ole Opry](#)," he said at the Hope Exchange, just before passing his Grammy Award around the room. "It's the longest-running radio show in American history."

He should know: Old Crow Medicine Show became Opry members in 2013.

"This is a banjo," he told the kids. "It's an African instrument, from the west of Africa. It was brought to America in the minds of African slaves who couldn't bring anything with them, but when they got to America, they built these instruments."

He also showed them the fiddle, with Irish roots, and told them that the blending of banjo and fiddle created the music that created Nashville, the Opry and a significant chunk of American culture.

"We're a country band," he says of Old Crow. "And there is a migratory pattern in this music that goes around the globe. This is war-torn stuff. It's suffering and love and joy and birth. That's all in country music. The fiddle and the banjo met here on this shore, in servitude and bondage, and somehow made this music. To say this is music about the beach and what you did with the girl you met there, that's a little bit insulting. But we've got history on our side."



John Hartford, pictured, made a strong impression on Old Crow Medicine Show's Ketch Secor. (Photo: File / The Tennessean)

That's not to say that Old Crow is averse to singing about a party, but on "Remedy," the parties revolve around eight dogs and eight banjos, or they take place in the conjugal trailer at Brushy Mountain prison.

There's a drinking song called "Firewater," but it's about alcoholism: "It's a mean old world when you're kicked to the gutter and the firewater is the one thing to put out the flame."

And a war-time song deals not with patriotism but with loss, as the narrator finds himself "standing by the grave of a dearly departed friend."

"I wanted to leave out the hero stuff and put a face and a story to a soldier," Secor says. "Being a U.S. serviceman is the toughest job in America. It's tougher

than coal mining, tougher than a divorce, tougher than cancer. It's not only the horrors of war, it's the lonesomeness. That's why the suicide rate for soldiers is higher than the rate of getting killed by roadside bombs."

A song such as "Dearly Departed Friend" would be an aberration, to say the least, on mainstream country radio. It would stick out like a sore thumb, or like an un-sore thumb on bruised and battered hands. Secor isn't worried about all that. He's armed with fiddles and banjos, and John Hartford explained to him long ago that such a combination was the key to life. Fiddles and banjos will prevail.

"I guess it would be exciting," Secor says. "We've existed without the help of large-scale radio operations. I like that WSM-AM signal: That's country radio to me. But maybe we'd help lend a taste of something real to some radio stations. The big boys, they might could use us."

If You Go

What: Old Crow Medicine Show on the "Grand Ole Opry"

When: 7 p.m. Tuesday

Where: Grand Ole Opry House, 2804 Opryland Drive

Tickets: \$29.50-\$69.50, available at www.opry.com

Reach Peter Cooper at 615-259-8220 or on Twitter @TNMusicNews.