

OLD CROW MEDICINE SHOW

50 Years of Blonde On Blonde

Fifty years is a long time for a place like Nashville, Tennessee. Time rolls on slowly around here like flotsam and jetsam in the muddy Cumberland River. But certain things have accelerated the pace of our city. And certain people have sent the hands of the clock spinning. Bob Dylan is the greatest of these time-bending, paradigm-shifting Nashville cats. By deciding to record his newly found rock n' roll voice in 1966 Nashville, Bob swung the gates of Country music wide open; so wide, in fact, that 50 years later there was still enough of a crack left for Old Crow Medicine Show to sneak its banjos and fiddles through the gates with string band swagger. Ours is a band booming in Nashville's post-Bob Dylan years. We came to town in the late 90's to play on the street corners, back when our city's provincial Nashville skyline, with the exception of the late-century "Bat Man Building," still looked neatly cut from the cover of the eponymous Bob Dylan album. Since then we've rocked the Ryman, gone improbably platinum, and been made members of The Grand Ole Opry. Now, amidst a New-Era Nashville skyline surrounded by towering cranes and boom shafts we've achieved our biggest accolade yet, becoming a part of the historic legacy of Columbia Records. 50 years can change a lot about a place like Nashville, Tennessee.

I love Bob Dylan. I mean I *love* him. In my opinion Bob Dylan, the bard, is the greatest spinner of rhyme and couplet since Shakespeare, no, he's *greater*. It is by no other force of nature, will, or reason that I play music for a living than simply to be like Bob. I know I'm not alone in this superlative praise. From every corner of the Earth, other voices will tell you the same. So when Peter Cooper from the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum pulled me aside in an East Nashville record shop back in January of 2016 to ask if Old Crow would consider helping the museum celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the making of *Blonde On Blonde* I didn't think twice before giving my emphatic, "Yes!" I hopped to it right away, cramming to learn the lyrics of this, perhaps, Dylan's most intensely lyrical of albums. One year later, if I even crack the spine of my 500 page Bob Dylan Lyrics book, it jumps right to "Rainy Day Women #12 & 35." From thereon comes 23 coffee and tobacco-stained pages, scribbled in the margins with things like---*play this like Memphis Jug Band, and earnest like Leonard Cohen, and fiddle solo here.* I sang my children to sleep with "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands" every night for a month until I remembered not to confuse "*with your sheets like metal and your belt like lace*" with "*with your sheet metal memories of Cannery Row.*" I dreamed and ate and walked and drove with eleven verses stuck inside my head of "Stuck Inside Of Mobile With The Memphis Blues Again," sailing through my brain with the fever of an actor trying to memorize Coleridge's Rhyme Of The Ancient Mariner. After two months of practice I could

recite the whole *Blonde On Blonde* album like the long-form, rambling, disembodied poem it is.

OCMS learned this from Bob: change, shift, pivot, keep moving, don't stop. For nearly 20 years we've taken this wisdom to heart. So, when we began rehearsals for *50 Years of Blonde On Blonde* it never entered our minds that we would try and play the record like Bob did. Instead we would try to do it like 50 years of Bob did. We would play it country, folk, and rock n' roll. We would play it acoustic and electric; hillbilly and hokum; at once Gospel-fired and Hava Nagila blues. Our performance would celebrate not only this seminal record, pop music's first double-album, but also Bob's legacy as our nation's premier shape-shifter/performer. Always bucking the trends. Always impossibly hard to define. Additionally, this record would celebrate the genre-bending, ever-unique Nashville Sound and the players, producers, and writers who, through a renaissance-like burst of creativity, dreamed up this powerfully alive form of American music. Finally, in order to capture the essence of what makes Old Crow Medicine Show the best old-time string band touring today, the record would be a live one.

We borrowed, begged, and stole from Bob. We listened to every recording of the songs of *Blonde On Blonde* we could get our ears on; outtakes, live recordings, bootlegs. We scratched out melodies, rewrote time signatures, added and removed chords; We made this our record, Old Crow's through and through, from Chance McCoy's frenzied fiddle on "Obviously 5 Believers" to Kevin Hayes' self-portrait delivery of "Leopard Skin Pill-Box Hat," from Critter's stripped and revealing "One Of Us Must Know (Sooner Or Later)" to the whistle blast of Cory's drill sergeant intro on "Rainy Day Women #12 & 35," from Morgan Jahnig's teeth-chattering bowed bass rumble to Joe Andrews' cephalopod styling on steel guitar. Altogether we took Dylan's 1966 *Blonde On Blonde* out of the dust jacket, scratched it up and melted it down, recast it, cut new grooves, and played it at 78 speed, all the while incorporating another truth we learned by listening to the master himself: when it comes to music nothing is sacred.

Fifty years later, banjos still twang in Nashville. Pedal steels still cry out from AM radio crackle. Country stars shine brightly for awhile while others fade as musical trends continue rolling onward like flotsam and jetsam on the muddy Cumberland River. Our city bustles, hums with energy, reaches ever skyward---but still remains the place where a spirit-made-music continues its fluttering dance from verse to chorus as it's done ever since Bob Dylan came to town, fifty years ago, and swung the gates wide open.

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Old Crow Medicine Show