



Old Crow Medicine Show Volunteer An Essay by Wiley Cash

I first came across Old Crow Medicine Show in Nashville in the spring of 2004. I was in town for a writing conference that I hoped would help me complete a novel set in the mountains of my native North Carolina, but that afternoon found me wandering the aisles of a record store, afraid that I'd wasted my meager funds on the conference fee and the gas it took to drive up to Nashville from Lafayette, Louisiana, where I was living at the time.

As I thumbed through CDs, an album for a band called Old Crow Medicine Show caught my eye. On the cover stood five young men about my age wearing white tank tops and flannel shirts. They looked like some combination of the tough guys I had grown up with and my father once he had changed out of his church clothes to spend a few hours beneath the hood of an old truck. The only thing missing from the album cover was the outline of a crushed pack of Winston Lights in the band's pockets and a cigarette dangling from their bottom lips. They reminded me of the people I was trying to write about in my North Carolina novel, which meant they seemed like people I already knew, and because of that they felt real.

Old Crow's music felt real too. Secor's growl that opens "Tell It to Me" and the harmonica blasts that follow sent me into an orbit that carried me back to the North Carolina mountains. The music kept me in those mountains until the final notes that closed "Wagon Wheel." It takes about ten hours to drive south from Nashville to Lafayette, which means I probably listened to O.C.M.S. twenty times straight, and I've been listening to it ever since. My father, who passed away last year, listened to it too. He was born in a mill village in 1943, and the album I bought that long ago day in Nashville was the only contemporary record we both loved. The album gave my father an emotional space to recall the music he had heard growing up, and it offered me a similar space in which to write a novel that, like Old Crow's album, ranged across the experience of the American South in the twentieth century. I had stumbled upon a time capsule in that Nashville record store, and when I sat down to put words on the page I opened the capsule and discovered the perfect musical artifact to push me forward and take me back.

While Old Crow's albums are powerful, their live shows are earth scorching, and on this scorched earth is where many people first meet the band. Some discover them on a street corner in a small town like Boone, North Carolina, where the legendary Doc Watson spotted them in 1999 and invited them to appear at MerleFest. Others may stumble upon them playing in a parking lot like Marty Stuart did a year later, before working to get them on the bill at the Grand Ole Opry. I saw them live for the first time in 2007 in Columbia, South Carolina. By that time they had followed 2004's O.C.M.S. with the politically punchy *Big Iron World* in 2006.

That night in Columbia, my wife-to-be and I stood in a dark, cement-floored concert hall and watched a group of madmen rage on stage just a few feet away. They were the same group of

hoodlums I had first laid eyes on in Nashville. I came of age during the punk rock 80s and the grunge rock 90s, and it was apparent that the members of Old Crow had burned through the music of those decades with their fists

clenched around fiddles and banjos and harmonicas. That evening, their music did not feel like old-time or new-time: it felt like all-time. It still does.

Although the band has come apart and back together over the years – plus or minus a few members – there is no doubt that the timeless quality of their sound is fueled by an intense awareness of the past. Just as Old Crow created an emotional space in which I wrote my first novel, they construct musical spaces for themselves by going “junking” for old records in order to forge something new. The result is not a nostalgic nod toward the past. It is not a rosy recasting of Depression-era Appalachia or a fetishizing of the day-to-day grind of flatland farms and muddy mill villages. Old Crow’s music walks the fine edge of resurrecting the ghosts of a lost time while animating them with the breath of contemporary life. They did this in 2008 with the release of the melancholy and ominous *Tennessee Pusher*, and they did it again with the poetic *Carry Me Back* in 2012. 2014’s Grammy award winning *Remedy* showcases both the scope of the band’s influences as well as their fearlessness in telling deeply personal stories, while their powers of resurrection are on full display in 2017’s *50 Years of Blonde on Blonde*, a live album that covers Bob Dylan’s historic record.

A few years ago, Ketch Secor and I became friends, and I told him about my using Old Crow’s music while writing my first novel, and that I was now at work on a novel about a 1929 mill strike in my hometown of Gastonia, North Carolina. He paused for a moment like a computer downloading a huge file, and then he rattled off the names of dozens of Depression-era Gastonia musicians who wrote about mill life, and then he steered me toward the places where I could find their music. Once again, Old Crow had created a space for me.

Last year, I received a note from Ketch after my father passed. Aside from his condolences, there was some good news: The band was at work recording their new album *Volunteer* in RCA’s famous Studio A, where icons like Chet Atkins and Waylon Jennings had recorded. It seemed like the magic of the space had rubbed off on the band. “We’ve been recording an exciting and expansive group of songs,” Ketch wrote. “I’ve got that funny feeling all over when, artistically, you know you’ve reached a new level.”

I have heard the album, and I more than agree with Ketch, and I’m certain that listeners will feel the same. The familiar sounds of fiddles and banjos haunt the record, but there are interesting turns like the hypnotic “Child of the Mississippi” (“Just before my daddy left, he hollered out at me, ‘Son, you’re a child of the Mississippi’”) and the ballads “Look Away” and “Homecoming Party,” a portrait of the toll life on the road takes and also one of the album’s most touching songs.

Old Crow Medicine Show is marking their twentieth anniversary as a band. Ketch Secor, Critter Fuqua, Kevin Hayes, and Morgan Jahnig are back with Chance McCoy, Cory Younts, and Joe Andrews, and with *Volunteer* they have created a powerful, South-haunted space that listeners, old and new, will no doubt feel at home in.

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