

Pop Music



On a Major Label, Strings Still Proudly Attached

Old Crow Medicine Show, one of America's premier roots bands, has a new album out.

By JEWELY HIGHT

NASHVILLE — When Old Crow Medicine Show, the nation's foremost old-time string band, joined the roster of a major label last year, its frontman, Ketch Secor, brought a 78 r.p.m. record of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, unearthed from Columbia Nashville's catalog, as a symbolic gift.

"Right now you might think that what Columbia Records does in Nashville is to promote the careers of mainstream country, radio-friendly artists," said Mr. Secor, 39 and straight-faced beneath a handlebar mustache. "But 80 years ago, what was Columbia doing in Nashville? They were recording 12 African-American 10- to 20-year-olds singing Negro spirituals from the 19th century," he continued, referring to the group that started at Fisk University here in 1871. "So when they record Old Crow singing spirituals in the 21st century, they're actually keeping that spectrum as wide as it needs to be. And it's our job to push it even further."

Old Crow, a six-member group that also features Joe Andrews, Critter Fuqua, Morgan Jahnig, Chance McCoy and Cory Younts (Kevin Hayes also played on the album), is so keen on showcasing history, Mr. Secor insisted its first album of original material for the label bear the same red, white and blue emblem as the 1924 Fisk Jubilee Singers record.

The album, titled "Volunteer" and due on Friday, is filled not with the spirituals Mr. Secor mentioned (figurative flourishes are his specialty), but with folk-rock testaments to dreaming and striving, tall tales of earthy heroism and galvanizing hoedowns powered by the group's vigorously played acoustic instruments — including fiddle, banjo, mandolin and upright bass — and drums. The group's sole gesture toward shrinking its distance from contemporary country was to hire the producer Dave Cobb, known for helping artists like Chris



Stapleton and Jason Isbell smuggle authentic sounds into the mainstream.

The devoted audience Old Crow has built by channeling its archival knowledge into raucous, warmhearted performances is robust by roots music standards, but hardly arena-scale. Over the course of its 20-year tenure, the group has lived out a professional paradox: caring more about its good standing with venerable institutions than advancing through the ranks of any format, genre or scene. Where the band's successes are concerned, Mr. Fuqua deadpanned, "A lot of things shouldn't have happened."

Today, deep in an era of roots revivalism the group is partly responsible for fostering, it's easy to forget how counterintuitive it seemed for the teenage Mr. Secor and his friend since junior high school, Mr. Fuqua, to embrace picking and singing with a hearty, collective voice at the height of grunge in the 1990s. Neither had been raised on traditional music. Seeking out old-timers to learn from was a deliberate choice. "The 'Don't trust anybody over 30' [attitude] was really 'Don't trust anybody under 30' for me," Mr. Secor said.

By 1998, he and Mr. Fuqua had found enough like-minded peers to form a band. In the early days, the group hunkered down in a cabin in the Appalachians of North Car-

olina, where they grew corn, made whiskey and serenaded their neighbors over CB radio, intent on experiencing an old-fashioned, subsistence lifestyle while they internalized a repertoire of jug band and prewar blues songs that, as Mr. Secor put it, "championed America's underclass."

To Mr. Secor and his pals, living as hardy homesteaders was part of committing their imaginations to traditional music. "How can you utilize that when you're a prep school kid, or your mom works at the college and you grew up on Cheerios, and you're as far from a coal mine as you are from equatorial Africa?" he asked, nodding to his background. "The way that you do it is that you put on the mask and embody it."

Old Crow did a lot of street-corner busking in those days, which was how the band got the attention of the influential flat-picking guitarist Doc Watson and Marty Stuart, a multifaceted champion of country tradition. Mr. Stuart saw them as carrying on a lineage of wild and woolly string band showmanship stretching back to the 1920s and '30s. "They filled that slot that was absolutely part of the foundational vision of the Grand Ole Opry," Mr. Stuart said in a phone interview. "And they do it in a beautiful, 21st-century, contemporary, rock 'n' roll, old-time way."

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On the road, Mr. Secor said, "we sort of endeared ourselves to a lot of different groups by being the band that was always leading the jam after the gig." He continued, "We were not the ones that were going to sell the millions of records and sell out the arenas, but we could be a part of that success and also affect those bigger artists' ability to spread this message to their listeners."

While the momentum that carried Mumford & Sons and others to mainstream success eventually drew them toward more modern rock sounds, Old Crow remained sonically steadfast.

The group gained and lost members, weathered a shaky hiatus at the beginning of this decade and accumulated an unlikely collection of Nashville milestones. Its most-covered track, "Wagon Wheel" — a sauntering road song that Mr. Secor completed at 17 from a Bob Dylan fragment — topped the country chart in a version by Darius Rucker. In a single week in 2013, the band was given both Opry membership and the Americana Music Association's Trailblazer Award. Then the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum invited the group to reinterpret the entirety of Dylan's opus "Blonde on Blonde" in conjunction with an exhibit. A live album, "50 Years of Blonde on Blonde," which came out in 2017, was the group's first major-label release.

After Old Crow had played nothing but reimagined Dylan covers for months, Mr. Cobb advised the group to save the finessing of its own new material for the studio. "He's like, 'Don't arrange [the songs]," Mr. Fuqua recalled. "Don't play them live. Don't do anything, but just come in."

On "Volunteer," the group incorporates instrumental textures like pedal steel and electric guitar here and there that weren't as prominent on past recordings. With its frisky, empathetic take on an immigrant's plight, "A World Away" exemplifies Old Crow's signature mixture of social-statement-making and yarn-spinning entertainment. And the willful protagonist of the wild-eyed romp "Shout Mountain Music" more or less sums up the band's ethic: "I ain't gonna change my sound when I get to Nashville town/Shouting mountain music all night long."

Releasing this music on a major label is a slyly contrarian victory for Old Crow, a chance for the group to gain a bigger platform while staying true to its priorities. "What the band can do," Mr. Secor said, "is be the exact same band that it was on the street corner."