

Review: The show rolls on for Old Crow Medicine Show

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Old Crow Medicine Show, "Volunteer" (Columbia Nashville)

Old Crow Medicine Show has produced some of the most original American music of the past two decades. Now comes "Volunteer," a new collection that combines the band's familiar buskers-on-steroids vibe with some of the best songwriting its members have ever done.

Old Crow has always shone brightest as a live band, and its amped-up shows are hard to replicate in the studio. Some of what it does is a lot like American blues, wherein the energy drawn from an audience doesn't translate well to recording. That's true here on lickety-split numbers like "Flicker and Shine" and "Shout Mountain Music," which almost certainly sound better live but feel caged-in somehow here.

The album's biggest misstep is a barge of a song called "Child of the Mississippi," which sinks from the weight of its own clichés, muddy water gonna carry me home and all.

But the band reaches for greatness elsewhere. It does its best work on four majestic ballads: "Old Hickory," "Homecoming Party," "Whirlwind" and "Look Away."

The latter, written by bandleader Ketch Secor, is a clear-eyed love song to the American South, flaws and all. Secor's elegant fiddle-playing pays homage to Ken Burns' "Civil War" soundtrack in all the right ways, accentuating Secor's passion for a land "where a man and a mule don't look much different to the boss man's scales."

It's a nuanced testimonial to a complex region, from a great American band that only seems to be getting better.