



Old Crow Medicine Show has managed to become an elusive, entertaining institution, and stay hungry

Masked and Uproarious

By JEWELY HIGHT

If you've ever read anything about Old Crow Medicine Show, you're probably familiar with the story of how frontman Ketch Secor, then a teenager, took it upon himself to flesh out a fragment of a Bob Dylan song and arrived at "Wagon Wheel," which eventually landed in the repertoire of the scrappy, street-corner string band Secor launched with his buddy Critter Fuqua. The story nested within that story is that Secor also got himself an education — from Dylan, the ultimate scrounger — in the art of captivatingly crafty creativity.

A decade-and-a-half into its existence as a band, it isn't easy to pin Old Crow to a single spot in the contemporary musical landscape and actually have it stick. Just look at the tangled route the group's signature number took to platinum certification. When eventual manager Norm Parenteau first heard the guys (including longtime bassist Morgan Jahnig and guitar player Kevin Hayes) close their Station Inn show with "Wagon Wheel" in 2001 — and heard the college-to-gray-hair, sell-out crowd singing along — he assumed it must be a cover of some hit song everybody knew but him. No label head in Nashville seemed to get it when Parenteau started pitching his clients' demo — nor did Clive Davis.

But Tommy Ramone dug it and the rest of the Crows' set when he stumbled into their show at a dive in New York City; he told Parenteau their energy "took him back to the late '70s." Then, fresh off breaking a little Brit-pop band by the name of Coldplay, the Nettwerk Records promotions team jumped at the chance to work "Wagon Wheel" and *O.C.M.S.*, the album it was on. The song grew to be a standard of college acoustic outfits, beer-and-tips country bands and perpetual sing-alongs, some captured on YouTube. The band even received correspondence from fans in the military who'd seen the song galvanize comrades heading into battle.

Dylan must not have minded the stout spirit the Crows brought to the tune, seeing as how he sent them another song shard to finish — the wanderer's waltz "Sweet Amarillo" on their new album *Remedy*. And if there was any lingering doubt about the mainstream accessibility of "Wagon Wheel," it evaporated when Darius Rucker took his cover version to the top of *Billboard's* Hot Country Songs chart last year. Flurries of indignant Facebook posts in the wake of Rucker's No. 1 misread the band's comfort with slyly shoring up a bridge to another audience segment.

Says Secor, on a conference call from Maine (with Fuqua on the other line from Nashville), "One of the nice things about 'Wagon Wheel' is we could delight in contemporary pop-country music, yet not have to be claimed by it. Darius is already there. And the pressure to have a [radio] hit, for those guys, is immeasurable. So we're glad that the guy that got the hit was somebody that we have a deep respect for, that we feel kinship with. ... It just feels natural, even though it's sort of bizarre, that it was the guy who my sister had his posters on the wall back in '92.

"It was great to get to be in the show," he adds, speaking metaphorically, "but to sort of have a bit part."

On the subject of shows, there's just one — aside from their own famously fun concerts — that the Crows are dedicated to for the long haul. That's the Grand Ole Opry — storied, living repository of musical and commercial traditions. With Marty Stuart's help, OCMS long ago went from picking in the Opry plaza out front to making regular appearances on the big stage, and last year they were inducted as official members — an exceedingly rare occurrence for an act that hasn't had singles of its own on the country charts, or for any old-time string band in generations. Rucker went in the previous year.

"I think that the reason Darius was inducted and we were inducted shortly thereafter," says Secor, "was because the Opry recognized that a song existed that captured the spirit of the Grand Ole Opry. ... The *song* now belongs to the Grand Ole Opry. And to my taste, that's the place I'd most like it to be heard. God, the only radio station that I really have any trust in being part of is Saturday night on WSM — and Friday, and the occasional Tuesday."

The same week the Crows joined the Opry, they also received their first Americana Music Award in the special and especially elastic category of Trailblazer. (They lost out in the New/Emerging Artist and Duo/Group categories in the past.)

Says Fuqua, "I think that goes to show just how many sections of the music industry have taken an interest in us, you know?"

"But we're not really fully immersed in any of 'em," Secor shoots back.

A band can get away with being a bit slippery with its allegiances when its members have a good handle on pleasing different kinds of fans, as Old Crow does. Noting that they sent copies of *Remedy* to all 64 of their fellow Opry members, Secor winds up for a demonstration of his skill at delivering a diverting surprise.

"I tell ya, the best review we got came from Barbara Mandrell," he says. "She wrote back this three-page letter saying how much she loved the record, the range of songs, and we had a little bit of every genre, the diversity of the music. And how proud she was to have us playing out at Fontanel. She said, 'The only thing I take issue with is your song 'Shit Creek.' I thought it was so wonderful that her problem with the song wasn't that we said 'Shit Creek,' but that we say 'goddamn.' She didn't like us taking the Lord's name in vain. But then she said, 'But that's up to you. Other than that, I think it's a stellar album.' And just to realize in hearing from her, 'Wow, Barbara Mandrell is kind of a target audience for us. We really want Barbara Mandrell to like this album.' "

On the other hand, Secor expresses droll disappointment at the fact that the new album wasn't branded with a parental warning. "They pulled the presses when they realized we didn't have a surefire best F.Y.E. seller," he says. "After albums that were full of cocaine and methamphetamine [references], we were finally getting ourselves a proper parental advisory sticker. But the way it is, it's just on iTunes, on the track itself."

Still, *Remedy* topped the iTunes Country Albums chart, no small feat since it had to beat out Miranda Lambert's *Platinum*, released a month earlier. More than their previous album on ATO, the three on Nettwerk or the ones they used to peddle out of the trunk, the Crows' latest assembles the ingredients for potent, outgoing appeal. With the help of producer (and former Flogging Molly guitarist) Ted Hutt, they bottled their untamed live energy, wrote some of their catchiest, most out-there romps (including a berserk number about a conjugal visit in a prison trailer), as well as some of their most evocative folk-country narratives, and shaped their arrangements for maximum impact with their current seven-piece lineup. It's an outré, prankish, poignant, lusty and larger-than-life affair by turns; the gloriously uncivilized — which is not to say unstudied — musical output of quick wits. Not everybody exercises that kind of freedom with an old-time string band template. Old Crow has established itself as one of the wilkiest, hookiest roots outfits around.

"The thing that changed the most with this record," says Secor, "was that we did all this [pre-production] work on our own. We'd never done that before. We always took whatever scraps we had to the producer and said, 'Here. What do we do?' But see, we didn't really all get along back then. We were such a disparate-end kinda bunch of musicians. Well, we've suddenly become this crack team. We're like the 1987 Blue Jays here. Nah, we're the '85 Royals. We're killin' 'em."

Fuqua laughs and rolls with the baseball shtick: "We're like the 1889 Cincinnati Red Stockings. We're that good."

Old Crow Medicine Show has had its growing pains, though. There was a period early this decade when it wasn't clear if the band would carry on, or who would be in it. Multi-instrumentalists Gill Landry and Cory Younts and singer-guitarist Chance McCoy came on board, and Willie Watson — who'd sung so many of the high, cutting parts — permanently disappeared from the lineup. That's a subject Fuqua and Secor are reluctant to address, except to say that the band wouldn't be where it is without Watson. Anyway, if Watson's own excellent solo album is any indication, he was inclined to hew closer to stripped-down traditionalism.

It's not at all difficult to get a critique of contemporary country radio out of Secor and Fuqua, but it's far more interesting to ponder the modest overtures they're making toward those same listeners. There's long been a small-town mindset to Secor's speechifying showmanship; he rhapsodizes about "turnin' 15-year-old dudes from Pulaski and girls from Paris, Tennessee, on to Dylan."

Fuqua offers his own take on who they're connecting with. He says: "I think because our music industry has become so compartmentalized and categorized, there's so many people out there that don't realize that they like country music, or should like country music, or see us for the first time and realize, 'Hey, this is country music. This is also my music. I can listen to it.' ... I think we break down some walls when it comes to compartmentalized music. Just looking at our audience, you know, we've got little kids, we've got 80-year-olds, we've got rednecks and hippies and people going to prison and just out of prison."

"And going to Afghanistan and just home from Afghanistan," Secor chimes in.

Later in the interview, Secor explains why they have a number of originals that focus on the working-class experience of fighting a war. (The finest, most human example, "Dear Departed Friend," is on the new album).

"Country music's supposed to be about championing the voice, the cause, the hearts of the hardest-working people in America," says Secor. "It's become sort of obvious to me that that is the U.S. servicemen and women; that's who's the hardest-working 35-year-old counterpart to myself. ... So that's why I think it's ever so important to tell that story."

Hard work has always had a more explicit place in Old Crow mythology than such high-flown notions as self-expression or self-reinvention, though Secor & Co. are the kinds of astute Dylan students who value that stuff too, even if they mask it. What they've put the most energy into, by far, is becoming flat-out phenomenal entertainers, right down to the ceremonious familiarity of Secor's ringleader persona.

Says Parenteau of their crowd-pleasing instincts, "I think a lot goes back to them busking on the streets. When you're playing for your rent, and you start figuring out, 'Oh, if we play this song, people take money out.' That's why when they started playing concerts, they knew what songs people liked, because they remembered, 'Oh, they put five dollars in the fiddle case.' Or, 'When we played this song, people walked away.' "

To hear Secor tell it, "Doc's Day," a hot, loose-limbed shuffle on *Remedy*, is a gag about street-corner pickers who are lacking in gusto.

"I really like poking a little bit of fun at everybody," he says. "It's all in good jest. ...When you see Americana musicians busking, it doesn't make you reach for your back pocket. It makes you hurry up and get where you're goin'. In the song, that's what the band figures out how to do — they figure out how to do it like Doc [Watson], and everything's kosher."