



WILL THE CIRCLE BE UNBROKEN?
Secor (bottom right) and his Old Crow mates.

PROFILE

Ketch Secor's Old-Time Religion

How a prep-school kid started Old Crow Medicine Show, America's wildest roots band
By Patrick Doyle

KETCH SECOR DOESN'T OWN A laptop or a smartphone, so most days when he wakes up on tour with his band Old Crow Medicine Show, he'll head to the local library to check his e-mail. "I was just in a library in Gallup, New Mexico, with 25 Navajos," he says. "It's communal, like the Greyhound station of the Internet." After the library, Secor will usually go "junking," digging up rare Dust Bowl-era 78s. At an antiques store in Nova Scotia last year, he found Wilf Carter's "When It's Apple Blossom Time in Annapolis Valley," which happened to be about the same valley where the band was playing an apple festival. Old Crow learned the tune in time for the gig as part of a set of regional songs. "We nailed

it," says Secor, 36. "We were singin' Acadian French songs in the Chiac dialect!"

Secor's obsession with old-time music has powered him through 16 years as frontman and fiddle player of Old Crow. They spent their early years playing everywhere from truck stops to Indian reservations, but they've recently graduated to much bigger venues, including a headlining spot at Colorado's Red Rocks. "They made me fall in love with country music," Marcus Mumford has said.

Last year, Darius Rucker scored a Number One country hit with a cover of Old Crow's "Wagon Wheel," which Secor wrote when he was 17 using a song fragment he heard on a Bob Dylan bootleg from 1973's *Pat Garrett & Billy the Kid* sessions. For Old Crow's new album, *Remedy*, Dylan sent the band "Sweet Amarillo," another song sketch from the same sessions. "It's surreal," says Secor. "Bob is the

guy who taught us how to steal effectively. It's amazing he noticed and gave us another shot at scribbling between his margins."

Today, Secor sits in the East Nashville living room of band co-founder Christopher "Crittter" Fuqua, who's lounging under a portrait of Jesse James and spitting tobacco juice into a coffee cup. Secor,

wearing a blue plaid button-up and calfskin boots that once belonged to his grandfather, flips through a book of old 78s and spins his favorites — including Sam McGee's "Easy Rider," later covered by Ray Charles and the Grateful Dead, and an apocalyptic 1927 sermon by Rev. A.W.

Nix. In conversation, Secor will talk about everything from surface mining to Greek mythology; at one point, he names landmarks from my small Maine hometown. "Ketch is a library, but he has this carnival-barker showman thing," says producer Dave Rawlings. "Whatever town you're in,

"We're the one-percenters, but we chose to make corn whiskey."

he knows the town next door that everyone looks down on. He'll say, 'I wanna welcome all the hillbillies from whatever that other town is,' and everyone laughs."

Secor didn't exactly grow up hillbilly. His ancestors built up a fortune in banking and business in Toledo, Ohio, before losing much of it in the crash of 1929; the city still features a building and street in their name. Secor's father was a headmaster at private Episcopal schools throughout

and sold weed. "You can't sing about those things unless you've been there," says Secor. "We're college boys from upper-middle-class childhoods. We're the one-percenters. But we chose to make corn whiskey."

In 2000, Old Crow were playing in the parking lot of a Tennessee music festival when country star Marty Stuart saw them and helped get them on the Grand Ole Opry bill. Old Crow didn't fit in immediately; after a few gigs, Opry man-

when I was like, 'Oh, well, maybe if I make this amount of money it'll be all right.' But it didn't equal out."

Tennessee Pusher, from 2008, was a weary diary of seedy characters, motels, heartbreak and drugs. "It was dark times," says Secor. "In our early days, the way we were living was like a ritualistic flesh-tearing ceremony. We all ended up getting pretty sick, pretty hurt, pretty burned."

"In a way, Old Crow completely lived the story of the classic troubadour musician in America," says Scott Avett, whose band the Avett Brothers recently took Old Crow on tour. "They've got this part of the package that is so true to the bone."


In 2011, Mumford & Sons invited Old Crow to join them on their Railroad Revival Tour, crossing the South in a train and jamming together for the Grammy-winning film *Big Easy Express*. But after the tour ended, the band announced a hiatus to seek "health and wellness" and parted ways with Watson. "We used to play all night," Secor says. "Alcohol kept the fire roaring until way past dawn the next day. It's different now."

Secor thought the group was over and planned to make solo records. He also reconnected with Fuqua, inviting him on a low-key Southern tour as an acoustic duo. "I had to remember the arrangements again off iTunes," Fuqua says. The

reunion led to a full-on Old Crow revival, with headlining shows at Nashville's Ryman Auditorium and a 2012 tour with the Lumineers opening. Around the same time, Rucker's "Wagon Wheel" became a smash, which helped generate extra interest in Old Crow and earn Secor a fat payday (he shares the songwriting credit with Dylan). "We were on autopilot for years," says Secor. "But great

things started happening again."

Despite the success of "Wagon Wheel," Old Crow couldn't have less in common with modern Nashville. "We're trying for songs more like 'Heart of Gold' than 'Cruise' or all those songs about the beach and the tractor that you drove up there," Secor says. "To me, country is rabble-rousing."

Driving through Nashville, Secor points out a local library he played recently. Like his hero Pete Seeger, Secor routinely sings at elementary schools, nursing homes and state wards for the mentally handicapped. "Pete is an example of the responsibility affluence requires," he says. "If you're on the inside track and you don't do something for those less fortunate, then you're not living to the code." 



PICKIN' PARTY Secor, Morgan Jahnig and Watson (from left) in 2011. Right: Secor in 1999, when the band moved to a North Carolina cabin and sold weed.



the South; Ketch – born Jay Ketcham Miller Secor – got a scholarship to New Hampshire's prestigious Phillips Exeter Academy, whose alumni include members of the Rockefeller family and Mark Zuckerberg. There, he learned to play banjo and explored the roots of Dylan and Jerry Garcia. "I'd constantly see him out on a bench or on the lawn playing banjo with other students or faculty," says Ryan Thomson, Secor's folk-music teacher at the school.

At 19, Secor attended Ithaca College while his high school girlfriend, Lydia, went to nearby Cornell; after she temporarily broke up with him (they are now married), he and Fuqua started traveling the country, working odd jobs and recruiting other musicians they met busking on street corners. He met co-founder Willie Watson in upstate New York and guitar player Kevin Hayes in Maine, where he worked raking blueberries.

In 1999, the bandmates settled in a cabin with no running water near Boone, North Carolina, a town known for its old-time-music scene. They made whiskey

and asked them to shower more. "We were stayin' in \$19-a-night crack motels, all in one room," Secor says as he steers his Jeep through Nashville, near a rough stretch where the band would stay during its early trips to town. "Of course we didn't smell good!"

Rawlings heard the band on the Opry radio show and soon volunteered to produce its 2004 LP, *O.C.M.S.* "They drove to the studio from New Orleans and had been up all night," he says. "Everyone in the band was dipping, spit cups at their feet. But as soon as I started hearing stuff on tape, I knew we were making a great record."

Old Crow became a reliable festival act, but at the same time, years of hard living were catching up. "You ever drink booze for four days straight and not eat?" says Fuqua, who left the band in 2007 to seek treatment for alcoholism and pursue an English degree from Texas' Schreiner University. Adds Secor, "Without Critter, I felt a bit adrift. And that's