

# RESTLESS SOUL

One of Nashville's most prolific and creative songwriters, **RODNEY CROWELL** is in the zone on his new solo album, *Tarpaper Sky*.

STORY BY  
JON FREEMAN

**R**odney Crowell could probably be excused for slowing down a little bit at this point, but he doesn't seem to have any interest in doing that. He's kept a steady output of new music coming—like 2012's *KIN* collaboration with poet Mary Karr and 2013's Grammy-winning *Old Yellow Moon* collaboration with Emmylou Harris—and he still gets out and plays shows, including a whirlwind week of gigs at South by Southwest in March.

"I just set my mind right before I got there," he cheerfully explains over the phone. "I said, 'You know what, this is work. Don't think of it as anything else. No soundcheck. Just go do your work.' And I made it through with energy to spare."

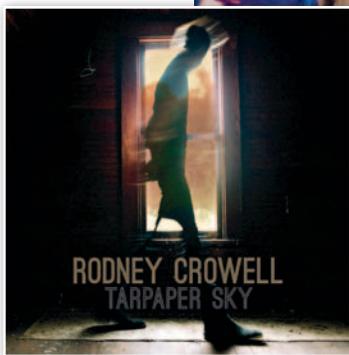
It would be a hefty challenge for just about anyone, particularly someone who's enjoyed more than 40 years working in the music business. But Rodney still seems like a boundless source of energy, and *Tarpaper Sky*—his first solo album since 2008—finds the singer/songwriter in top form.

Rodney originally started on the project back in 2010 and had some of the songs recorded. But then he got the exciting opportunity to work with Mary Karr on *KIN*, which featured vocal contributions from Vince Gill, Norah Jones, Lucinda Williams and more. "To be honest with you, my passion for it overtook [*Tarpaper Sky*] because those songs happened so fast and they were of a quality that I was delighted with," he says.

And when it rains, it pours, as they say. "Right in the middle of that, Emmy calls me and said, 'Let's make a record together,'" recalls Rodney. And since you don't say no to Emmylou Harris, the pair of old friends wrote and recorded *Old Yellow Moon*. "So that moved to the head of the line," he says. "I knew that I would eventually finish this record. I was proud of what I was doing. I wanted to get it out, but I said, 'No, I'm gonna trust the timetables here.'"

So it took Rodney a little longer to get there, but *Tarpaper Sky* was finally finished. The lead-off song, "The Long Journey Home," which chronicles a cross-country ride and the shifting landscape along the way, could almost serve as a metaphor for the album's creation. "When I came back to finish it up, I had a new batch of songs I had accrued over that time period. I had gotten off into another thing that didn't really go with the original tone of *Tarpaper Sky*," explains Rodney of putting the final touches on it, which required making sure the song selection was cohesive in spite of the time gap. "So there were songs that I was just itching to record and did, but once I tried to fit them in with the other songs on *Tarpaper Sky*, it didn't fit." Presumably those tunes will appear on a future project, so don't worry.

But what you can hear on *Tarpaper Sky* are more of



Rodney reunited with his former bandmate and longtime friend Emmylou Harris (above left) for the Grammy-winning collection *Old Yellow Moon*.

Rodney's intriguing character studies like the Dylan-esque "Frankie Please" and its rapid-fire lyrics or the fond, tiny

details of family in "Grandma Loved That Old Man." There's a literary quality to much of what Rodney does, like the title phrase's employment to describe a lonely night in "God I'm Missing You."

The pastoral landscapes of southeast Texas (where Rodney was born) and Louisiana are prevalent in several songs, including "The Long Journey Home," "Fever on the Bayou" and others. Rodney drew on his memories of living there for inspiration, so his stories—even the fictionalized ones—have the ring of truth. "I don't know that I've ever seen it anywhere but down there, where they whitewash the trunks of trees. Was it because of some low-lying insect that would get in the tree or if it's just pretty?" he ponders. "But down through that part of the world, it's an interesting thing. I wouldn't live there now but it certainly holds romance for me. I guess because my childhood there I can access early memory, and the poignancy and vividness of early memory is good fuel."

That fuel makes a potent mixer for Rodney's recording approach, which is to capture everything essentially live without many overdubs. Overproduced records, he says, have had their "sexuality" removed or just feel outright lifeless.

"It started with me with a record called *Sex & Gasoline* [from 2008] where everything that you hear was played live in the studio and it's performance over production," he says. "I'm not interested in produced music anymore. I'm interested in performed music." With the kind of energy Rodney brings to the game, fans can look forward to many more great performances. **CW**