

Acoustic Classics—the new old songs of Rodney Crowell

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Country singer-songwriter Rodney Crowell (born 1950) is celebrating his fortieth year as a recording artist. To mark the occasion, he has released *Acoustic Classics*, an album that sees him revisiting and rerecording a selection of songs written throughout his career. The new versions are performed in more stripped-down and intimate settings than those in the original recordings.

Rodney Crowell is one of several talented country songwriters and performers who emerged outside of the Nashville establishment in the 1970s. Like his fellow Texas transplants, songwriters Guy Clark and Townes Van Zandt, Crowell was perceived to be more authentic than the increasingly pop-oriented sounds coming out of Music City.

His big break came when Emmylou Harris recorded his “Bluebird Wine” in 1975. He then joined her renowned “Hot Band” for the remainder of the 1970s. Harris and the Hot Band would record several more of Crowell’s songs, including “Ain’t Living Long Like This” and the definitive version of his “Leaving Louisiana in the Broad Daylight.”

As a solo artist, Crowell’s greatest success was probably the 1988 album *Diamonds & Dirt*, which produced several hits. Despite this, Crowell has himself admitted that he may not have come into his own as a performer until his 2000 album *The Houston Kid*. While he tends to be too dismissive of his earlier work, it’s true that some of his strongest material is featured on albums that came relatively late into his career, including *Fate’s Right Hand* (2003) and *The Outsider* (2005). No matter what period of his career the listener finds him in, Crowell’s singing voice somehow always seems about 10 years younger than he is.

In more recent years, several of Crowell’s songs became major hits for popular country singers,

including “Please Remember Me,” recorded by Tim McGraw, and “Making Memories of Us,” recorded by Keith Urban.

Acoustic Classics is not just a greatest hits package of rerecorded fan favorites. Crowell wanted to revisit some of his past work from a more mature point of view. Dissatisfaction with his earlier performances, however fair or unfair the assessment may be, has driven him to take another crack at these songs. The new collection provides a good sense of his abilities as a songwriter, his considerable strengths as well as some of his weaknesses.

“Ain’t Living Long Like This” and “Leaving Louisiana in the Broad Daylight,” two of Crowell’s best contributions to Emmylou Harris’s Hot Band, are as enjoyable now as they were in their earlier versions. If the new video for “Leaving Louisiana” is any indication, Crowell still has great affection for these early compositions. Other songs on the album, however, are more revealing.

In his lesser moments, Crowell’s music becomes too sentimental. The listener will sometimes find him straining after vivid imagery. “Anything but Tame,” written with poet and memoirist Mary Karr, suffers from both problems. Over a martial guitar strum, the singer recalls a precocious adolescence “when our feet were tough as horn and our eyes were sharp as flint” and a friend even more precocious than himself. They never wanted to be tamed, he recalls of the children. Later in life, one of them seems to have turned out a rebel, while the other has indeed become tame and regrets it.

The plain-spoken quality of Crowell’s singing voice sometimes lets him get away with lines that are maudlin or nostalgic, but he can’t quite manage it here. The evocations of childhood are just too idyllic. It

comes very close to the fetishization of small-town country life so prevalent in country music's mainstream.

Things also go a bit far on "Making Memories of Us," in which the singer pledges a lifetime of love to someone. The chorus is certainly memorable. It's not difficult to see why it became such a hit for Keith Urban. But this, too, oozes with sentimentality. When Crowell begins singing about his true love's "mother" and "pa," it simply becomes a country cliché. "We'll follow the rainbow wherever the four winds blow," he sings at one point. This is faux romanticism. Stripping this version of the song down to acoustic instruments doesn't make it any less so.

The swinging "Lovin' All Night" is far more romantic than those songs. There's real passion here. The guitars chug along in the Texas boogie style so popular with writers like Crowell and Guy Clark. Crowell sings, "Baby pull the covers back over my head/I don't want to get up out of this bed/I don't want to drag it on off to work/That big boss man is really a jerk." Fiddles take the role of the brass section in a swing band, interjecting with a few stabs of notes as if to scratch the singer's itch.

Another swinging Texas boogie-style track, "She's Crazy for Leaving," was co-written by Clark. It's an amusing tale of a relationship falling apart, with a man making a final plea to his parting lover as she boards a bus to leave him once and for all. "She's crazy for leaving/I told her so/And the boys at the bus stop just said 'Man let her go!'" Crowell sings. The response of the onlookers is perfect. The character singing the song, for his part, is wonderfully oblivious to anything he might have done to have caused any of this.

"I Couldn't Leave You if I Tried" tells the story of a less-successful break-up. It is a superbly structured song. The verses blend into the chorus exactly as they should. The melody sits perfectly in its place. The character in the song evidently tries, but fails, to leave someone. He then realizes with some embarrassment and astonishment that he really does love the one he left and knows he won't be leaving after all. It captures some of the passion, aggravation and often inexplicable attraction mixed up in love and relationships.

"Tennessee Wedding" is a beautiful new song Crowell wrote for the occasion of his daughter's wedding. When he begins to sing the chorus "Marry

me/my dark eyed pearl/my raven-haired country girl/Marry me and we'll sail away home" there is a careful and subtle ascending of notes, like the combination of hope and nervousness that accompanies the proposal.

There are missteps on *Acoustic Classics*, including Crowell's decision to speak rather than sing the verses on a new version of "Shame on the Moon," once a hit for Bob Seger. But the better moments stand out.

While he may never have been quite as oppositional as contemporaries John Prine or Steve Earle, Rodney Crowell has sung convincingly about love and relationships, and he has devoted a fair amount of affection and amusement—but never mockery—toward the drunken troublemakers and egotists that populate so many of his songs. He doesn't moralize. He is not a pessimist or a misanthrope.

Country music may be known for its sad songs about virtually everything going wrong, but in much of it—and certainly in Rodney Crowell's music—there is a fair amount of optimism too. Crowell's characters, so many of them ordinary working-class people, get knocked around by life, but they remain on their feet, or they're at least trying to get back on them.



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