Two recent albums from country music singer Charley Crockett: *Welcome to Hard Times* and *10 for Slim: Charley Crockett Sings James Hand*

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2 September 2021

Charley Crockett is a country music performer originally from the south Texas farming community of San Benito in the Rio Grande Valley. Six years ago, at age 31, he began releasing albums on independent record labels. In that short span of time, he has managed to put out 11 such albums. For much of the decade prior to 2015, he busked and played live shows across North America and Europe.

Contemporary mainstream country music is dominated by commercial calculations and often has by-the-numbers production and hackneyed imagery. Crockett's musical approach is a welcome alternative to the largely formulaic material. His best songs convey an underlying vibrancy and seriousness that deserve attention.

It is above all Crockett's voice—influenced as much by soul, Cajun, rock and R&B as it is by traditional country sounds—that lends his work an intriguing and distinctive character. His website indicates that his early musical experiences included New Orleans jazz, hip hop and soul, and some of this finds reflection in his intonations and phrasings. His singing and the thrust of his songs have a firmness and confidence, suggesting someone who has spent his career performing on street corners and in bars, needing to grab and keep the attention of unfamiliar, even transient audiences.

Crockett's recent albums *Welcome to Hard Times* (2020) and *10 for Slim: Charley Crockett Sings James Hand* (2021) offer an opportunity to look more closely at the music of this interesting new artist.

Welcome to Hard Times

On *Welcome to Hard Times*, Crockett performs 13 songs centering largely around the difficulties of romantic love, personal loss and individuals facing impossible situations. The song content was written prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the "hard times" are mainly conceived in the "drifter" tradition of what is often referred to as "outlaw" country music. This style is usually associated with 1970s Texas singer-songwriters like Willie Nelson, Townes Van Zandt, and Waylon Jennings. On Crockett's album, country blues ballads are mixed in with livelier "honky-tonk" songs about figures constantly on the wrong side of good fortune.

The results of the songs are striking at their best, but not without complications. Crockett's soulful country singing props up several songs that do not make a strong impression lyrically. On the title song "Welcome to Hard Times," performed over lively barroom-style piano chords, Crockett opens by singing "Life's a casino, I'm tellin' you / And everybody's playin': boys and girls / Women, children, me, and you / The ice re loaded and verything's fixed / Even a hobo would tell ou this."

The "hard times" that Crockett sings about never entirely come into focus. His baritone singing about life "not being fair" certainly has resonance for millions of people, and his voice hints at the difficulties of life. But the content of the song never convincingly or movingly captures why life is so hard. Where these pains might be coming from, or from whom, one never learns.

A similar pattern repeats itself on other "outlaw" ballads such as "Paint It Blue" and "Blackjack County Chain." Each is haunting, constructed around Crockett's world-weary voice and the very capable guitar playing of his band. But neither has a deep emotional impact. The

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characters don’t get beyond familiar country music tropes—such as a bandit on the run or a chain gang that beats a cruel warden to death.

The one song in this ballad vein that does cut deeper is the banjo-anchored “The Poplar Tree,” the album’s final number. The song is about a lovelorn, “Old West” figure who gets lynched by a revenge-driven mob, in a case of mistaken identity. Crockett’s last lines, plaintively sung, make a memorable and eerie impression.

Songs about heartache and loneliness produce the deepest impact, although there are too many such songs on *Welcome to Hard Times*.

Dark tunes like “Fool Somebody Else“ could almost pass for rhythm and blues ballads, albeit interestingly underpinned by steel guitar and harpsichord.

On “Heads You Win,“ Crockett’s high register vocal effort is an unusually refreshing take on the “hard luck” love song, carried by his inventive phrasings and vulnerability in the refrains.

Overall, the uneven quality of the songs is bound up with their lack of concreteness. Crockett often sings about drifters and figures on the run from something—heartache, a botched relationship, an unfulfilled promise. But the songs often lack the familiar, truthful details of life today. His remarkable singing disguises this weakness on some numbers but wears thin over the course of the entire 13.

10 for Slim: Charley Crockett Sings James Hand

On the more recent *10 For Slim: Charley Crockett Sings James Hand*, the songs again focus largely on men and women down on their luck. The album is a tribute to the relatively unknown Texas country singer-songwriter James Hand, who died of a heart attack in 2020 at 67.

Hand has been lauded by figures like Willie Nelson and Dale Watson as one of the great “unheralded” country singers of the last few decades. He began tirelessly writing and performing songs at age 47, which possibly contributed to his poor health. Live recordings of Hand’s efforts, such as the Hank Williams-influenced “In the Corner, At the Table, By the Jukebox,” provide a sense of his heartfelt singing style and vulnerability.

Crockett opens *10 For Slim* with an introduction recalling evenings when he watched Hand performing “on stage with tears in his eyes…before he disappeared again back into the hot Texas night.”

Most of Hand’s songs are written from the vantage of an older person who has lived through difficult relationships of one variety or another. While there is a repetitive quality to this theme, the emotions conveyed by the lyrics can be vivid. One does get the sense that Hand’s heartache was “hard-earned.”

With Crockett, the musical quality of Hand’s songs becomes more engaging than in the originals. The guitar playing is often inventive and up front. Crockett’s version of Hand’s “In the Corner,” for instance, swings and bounces, becoming an appealing dance hall song.

A musical highlight of the album in this regard is the “road song” “Midnight Run,” which is driven by Crockett’s crooning and an evocative guitar lick.

There is a sharper quality at times in Hand’s lyrics. Certain phrases and moments catch one’s ear, such as on the breakup song “So Did I”: “When you stopped loving me, so did I / Ain’t it strange, now we both see eye to eye.”

Certain recognizable characters also strike a chord, such as the barroom “lowlifes” on “Over There That’s Frank.” The song’s characters are treated in humane vignettes by Hand, and one gets a sense of why they appeal to the broken-hearted narrator, who doesn’t try to paint a rosy picture of the setting itself.

Again, all told, the music mainly focuses on “hard luck” love songs—too much so. Crockett does an admirable job in servicing Hand’s songs, improving their musical quality and highlighting the songwriter’s strengths at times. But the listener is somewhat fatigued toward the end by the limited world, so to speak, represented in the songs.

Crockett’s unconventional singing is intriguing and refreshing. But the songwriting needs to catch up to the singing and musical talent. There is more to life than heartache in love. The performer is being a little too easy on himself. The pain that people feel ultimately has roots beyond the bars and empty living rooms, in the social and economic conditions in which we live. Should he pursue these other sides of life, the music will be well served by Crockett’s very evident talents.

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