



RODNEY CROWELL

Interview with Rodney Crowell

By: Steve Ferentzy

The interviewer called an hour early. He really should have known better, having himself lived in the Central Time Zone for a couple of years. But the interviewer was merely following the directions of the record label. To make matters worse, the artist was in the middle of writing, a process that no one of a creative bent likes having interrupted. And the writing, according to the artist, was taking place in some sort of idyllic beachside locale (belying the 615 (Nashville) area code that the interviewer dialed). Still, the artist was forgiving, and after some initially dodgy cell phone service, the interview took place, and turned out to be a hell of a lot of fun.

The artist is none other than Rodney Crowell, one of the best songwriters on planet Earth, and one of the true beacons of American Music – pick your favorite sub-genre, he’s done ‘em all. But the writing that got interrupted was not of a new song, one of those three-minute masterpieces that Crowell has seemingly effortlessly turned out since the late 1970s, but rather a book – a veritable piece of literature – that, according to the author, will be nothing like your standard musician’s tell-all fare. How refreshing that is in this day and age: a 50-something year-old artist of considerable skill, experience and insight choosing to broaden his horizons and try to conquer the literary world.

As it turns out, this same spirit of experimentation is very much in place on Crowell’s new album, the sublime “Sex & Gasoline”. For the first time in a very long time, the normally self-produced Crowell has relinquished the producer’s chair, this time to the estimable Joe Henry. And he’s ecstatic about it. Henry has given this album a totally different feel from any of Crowell’s previous records; slightly more organic in spots, more playful in others. Therefore, any remnants of Music Row’s influence (steadily disappearing from his work since the beginning of the decade) are nowhere to be found here. “Diamonds And Dirt”, as magnificent and hit-laden as it was, was over twenty years and at least one “credibility scare” (Google it) ago. Not that, say, Tim McGraw couldn’t turn some of these new songs into Country hits, but it would be impossible for him – or anyone – to improve on the originals. Crowell’s voice is a wizened thing of wonder and a whole lot of soul; these stories are his and best heard that way. The artist abandons his cell phone, opts for a land line, and our interview begins thusly...

Amped: I’ve been playing the heck out of Sex & Gasoline – it’s great. And the simple word pairing is the best, most evocative title I’ve heard in a long time.

Crowell: It was a song I was writing – the first song I wrote that became this collection of songs. It was like articulating two personal experiences: one, somebody very close to me in trouble, and two, the whole friggin’ world in trouble. There’s a young woman in trouble, and genuinely, somehow culture is projecting some form of sex on her. And the rest of the way I look at it is the greed and oil that drives me crazy. So it sort of became one thing. It’s just me ranting, really.

Well, the gasoline reference seems sort of prescient now – how many dollars per gallon ago did you start writing the material for this album?

(Laughs) I wrote four songs, and I recorded a whole record. And then I canned the record, but I kept four of the songs, one of which was “Sex And Gasoline.” So I sort of started over, and I went and made this record with Joe (Henry). So, I sort of lose track of time. But I only re-recorded four songs from the first record I made.

Completely redone from the bottom up?

Yeah, I chucked it out and started over.

So, I am the youngest of five, and I’ve been told my entire life that you are supposed to get more conservative as you get older, but I haven’t. And I’ve noticed you haven’t.

God forbid!

Not only that, but you’ve become more of a topical writer in recent years. The only comparison I can make that’s sort of close is Jackson Browne, but his writing is a bit more polemically charged than yours. Are your eyes more open now than in the past?

That’s just what happened. I remember reading an article in Vanity Fair with a group of filmmakers: Spielberg was one, and George Clooney, around the time he made “Good Night And Good Luck.” Anyway, collectively they were saying that artists should thank the Bush administration, because it galvanized everybody’s focus.

No doubt. On that note, I read some time back that you were trying to swing your old buddy Vince Gill’s vote. How’s that going?

(Laughs) No Comment! Hey, in truth, I’m not being evasive, but I’ve sort of evolved to a place where I think none of that matters. I have no interest in changing anybody’s perception of reality. Because God knows, and time and time again it’s been proven to me, that I’m so far off the mark that I should have kept my mouth shut from the beginning.

Sounds like where I sit at my family’s dinner table.At any rate, I haven’t seen many songs that have overtly addressed intelligent design, but you’ve got one. “The Rise And Fall Of Intelligent Design” is the most elegant jab I’ve heard yet. It’d make for a great double A-side with the New York Dolls’ “Dance Like A Monkey.” You take on a woman’s perspective in that song.

I’m waiting for some of my women friends to weigh in as to whether or not I had any right or even came close to picking up their perceptions. But I did want to place myself in that –I wanted to switch genders to narrate this song. So actually, it is a male narration, to have the narrator embrace the idea of switching gender, and then delivering the narration from that point of view. I thought that was a pretty cool place to come from. And I worked on that song quite a long time to where I felt like I’d stayed in that “no man or woman’s land.”

It worked for me.

I’m curious. I don’t know – with this record, it’s different for me, and I feel like I don’t know what to..you know as far as some of my friends go, some people are just absolutely elated with it, it’s so good. And I’ve had other dear friends say, you know, frankly, I just don’t like this. Not that I’ve really experienced that before, so, maybe I’m onto something.

Maybe they’re not used to hearing you with a Joe Henry production. He’s got a nice touch, and it really shines here. Your records are usually self-produced. What was it like handing over the reins to him?

My words were this, and you may quote me. “God! I should have done this ten years ago!” But I revise that statement – I should have done it twenty-five years ago. I can testify it’s a lot easier to hand that over.

That being said, you spent a lot of years working within the Nashville system, and you still have a lot of friends there. What do you think of the current state of Music Row?

Oh, I don’t know enough about it to even pretend that I could make a blanket statement like that. I still have a house there, but I find myself often elsewhere.

Did you use any co-writers on this album?

No, I wrote it all.

A heightened level of freedom came into your work starting with “The Houston Kid.” To what do you attribute that? Was it just from leaving the system?

Awareness. Personal awareness. And a few small epiphanies that led me to a larger epiphany, that basically stated, says ‘from this day on, everything I do counts.’ So I want to make damn sure it’s exactly what I want it to be.

I’ve got several favorites on the new record. “Truth Decay” knocked me out, as did “The Night’s Just Right”, “Funky And The Farm-Boy”– great groove there. Do you have any favorites?

“FROM THIS DAY ON, EVERYTHING I DO COUNTS SO I WANT TO MAKE DAMN SURE IT’S EXACTLY WHAT I WANT IT TO BE.”

I’d say mine and Joe’s conversation on “I’ve Done Everything I Can” – that’s Joe Henry doing the response vocal. Then again, I think “Moving Work Of Art” is a really good piece of writing. I’m proud of the whole premise of “Rise And Fall Of Intelligent Design.” And “Forty Winters” is a narration that’s based on a real experience. A friend’s husband died very young from Alzheimer’s, so it’s written from her point of view, someone who’s experienced that loss. I’m particularly proud of the writing on that.

I’m looking through the song titles here –“I Want You #35” – is that a Dylan sequel?

It turns out to be, as does “Truth Decay,” which was the title of one of T-Bone Burnett’s albums. I knew that when I was writing it. But I very rarely write a song with a title in mind at first. Eight times out of ten I discover the title or the hook within the process of writing the song. I really didn’t know where I was going with it until I came to that, and I knew that T-Bone had that title, and I ran into him later and said, “I made a song out of your title,” and he said, “God bless.” So when I also hit on the line “I Want You,” I was aware of three or four songs with that title: Dylan’s, an Elvis Costello song, even Roy Head did one, so I just made it “I Want You #35,” with kind of a nod and a wink to say, “yeah, I know what I’m doing here.”

On some of the songs from your last few albums, for example “Earthbound,” you come off as sort of a Zen master. So this album is more topical, but you seem more satisfied as well.

Yeah. Our blind trudge to the sea doesn’t really shake my serenity. Really. It’s just irritating. But I’ve no right to judge. Though I’m certainly within my rights to express my sensibilities. The farther I go on with it the more, well, as you said about dinner with your family, people are who they are. The chance of my changing somebody’s point of view about something political is very narrow. But I do hold out the notion that I might change somebody’s emotional landscape.

So…tell me about the book. Is it sort of a memoir?

It is a memoir.

Biographical, or just professional stuff?

Nothing about music. Well, that’s not true – there’s a chapter about music when I was eleven years old. But it doesn’t go into anything about my life as a professional musician. Maybe there’s a reference here and there, because there was no way through the narration without alluding to the fact that I had, say, just gotten back from England when something happened. But nothing about music.



I've been keenly aware from day one that I didn't want to have a book published that would wind up on the music. I've been intent upon creating something that stands as – I'm gonna go ahead and say this – as a form of literature, as opposed to just writing about music.

Now I'm really intrigued. Any ETA for it?

If I can stay and work on it down here, in another month I should have it ready to work with an editor.

Is there going to be a tour?

Yes. I'm going to press on for another two weeks of writing, and then I've got to pull my head up out of that and try to swing back into music. The deeper I get into writing this kind of language, well; I've gotten a long way away from music.

“...WRITING A BOOK IS LIKE A LOVE AFFAIR.”

It's like an addiction when you get into a good groove of writing – is that what's happening to you?

I'm far enough now that I actually see the arc. I remember when I first started this I read somebody who said that writing a book is like a love affair. You start out with the infatuation, you wind up in the dark night of your soul; you come out the other side and realize what you've been working on. I'm starting to crawl out of the other side now and realize that there actually is an arc, and that some of the things I was working on early have paid off late. But being a student of writing, I don't approach this any differently than writing songs. Though with songs, you can goof off a lot more. When writing a book, your dedication to the daily work habit is the single most important thing about it other than the sensibility to do it in the first place.

I've always thought that there should inherently be more freedom in songwriting than prose, but that doesn't explain Hunter S. Thompson.

Yeah (laughs)!

Nor does it explain a superb songwriter friend of mine who, for instance, can't stand dangling prepositions like “where it's at.” He's a stickler for grammar.

I don't think you can write songs without a real love of vernacular and colloquial language. The most beautiful songs ever written, like, Johnny Cash: “how high's the water mama? / five feet high and rising.” It's all vernacular. And it's brilliant. I daresay Shakespeare – his language was vernacular.

If you want to take it to the most ridiculous extreme, listen to the old Peter Sellers recordings of Beatles songs, where he delivers “A Hard Day's Night” like Lawrence Olivier.

(Laughs) I've never heard that –but I've heard Joe Pesci sing “Got To Get You Into My Life.”

Is Claudia (Church – Crowell's wife) working on anything musical? I loved the album she did for Warner some time back. I read that she's working on a screenplay.

Yes, and she's editing a film she made of us recording this “Sex & Gasoline” record. Nashville didn't know what her ambitions and sensibilities were. She went on her first radio tour and said “I'm not so sure I can do this.” She sings like a bird. But her ego is not...she's not one of those people who needs crazy attention like the rest of us. It takes an empty core to want to drag yourself through a radio tour.

Musically, what's floated your boat lately?

Actually, I was driving to the airport to pick up Claudia, listening to Elton John's “Tumbleweed Connection.” So many great songs, like “Talking Old Soldiers.” Brilliant piece of work. And I was thinking, “God, I'm so stuck in the early '70s.” It's my favorite time for the recording process, like 1969 to '72. There's something about “Abbey Road” and “The Band,” right in there with the “Easy Rider” soundtrack, and roll on into early ZZ Top, James Taylor and those Elton John records. However the compressors were firing, and however the 16-track was working and how dry everybody was willing to record stuff was spectacular.

James Taylor wrote the liner notes for a reissue of Carole King's “Tapestry” wherein he described the era as a time when “the extraordinary was commonplace.”

I'm not so sure we know how to use compressors the way they did back then. We crank preamps and use compressors to make everything so present in the mix. But I venture to say what we liked so much about those old recordings, like Jackson Browne's “Doctor My Eyes,” is the way guitars disappear – something disappears and something else pokes out. It's kind of like this sonic collage that rolls across in front of you and just sounds fantastic. But to get back to your original question about music, I was watching a movie called “The Jacket” with Adrien Brody, and there was a piece of music at the end, you couldn't even buy it in a record store – Jane Doe. My wife helped me find it online. Then again, I'd get the next Bob Dylan and Tom Petty records.

The old greats seem to be able to still work the studio to make records that at least approximate the sounds you were speaking of before. Point of curiosity about “Sex & Gasoline” – Joe Henry is an analog guy, correct?

Actually, we used ProTools. This is the first record I've ever made on ProTools. And I actually made my peace with it before I arrived at Joe's place. Joe had an eight-track (analog) machine, and I was eager to record basic tracks on an eight-track machine. But he said, “No, listen – Ryan (Freeland – recording engineer) has got it. Ryan knows how to use this gear.” I made the switch to ProTools – I don't have ProTools in my studio, we still record basic tracks to analog tape – but I'm OK with it now. In the beginning, I thought the converters sounded horrible. But with Apogee converters now, they've caught up. My favorite sound, other than those seventies records, Joni Mitchell records, where, what did James Taylor say, the extraordinary was commonplace?

Yes.

Yeah, well, still my favorite sound ever is those old Sony tape recorders with those little microphones and compressors in them where you just turn the volume all the way up and play. It distorts so beautifully. I've taken all those writing demos to the studio and just begged engineers to make me sound like this.

You mentioned Joni Mitchell, and she was one of the artists James Taylor cited when he made that assessment. And “Sex & Gasoline” reminds me of a Joni Mitchell lyric, where she describes artifice, brutality and innocence as “The Three Great Stimulants.”

I'm honored.

So, now that we have this great new record, we have to wait for the book, eh?

I hope I don't disappoint.

Rodney Crowell
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