



RODNEY CROWELL

CLOSE TIES (NEW WEST RECORDS)

Rodney Crowell has been doing this for a while. In fact, his career has been so long and varied that you have to specify exactly which this you're talking about. There's the record-making, which dates back to 1978 (when he released *Ain't Living Long Like This*), peaked commercially a decade later (with *Diamonds & Dirt*, which yielded five number-one country hits), and has only grown in sophistication and power in recent years. There's the fiercely lyrical and personal songwriting, which has attracted the attention of everyone from Bob Seger (who famously covered "Shame On the Moon") to Keith Urban (who had a number-one hit with "Making Memories of Us"). And then there's the autobiographical writing, which extends beyond the music world to a memoir, *Chinaberry Sidewalks*, which was published in 2011.

Now there's a new album, *Close Ties*, on which Crowell both demonstrates his strengths as a songwriter and illustrates how he has learned to balance personal recollection, literary sophistication, and his profound musical reach. It's at once his most intimate record and his most accessible, the product of years of understanding the ways songs can enter—and be entered by—life. "It's a loose concept album, you could say," Crowell says. "And the concept is related to how you tell stories about yourself. Having a few years ago written a memoir, my sensibilities toward narrative—especially trying to find a common thread in different pieces of writing—had become a part of my songwriting process. One of the reasons I brought Kim Buie in as a producer is that I wanted her to work with me the way an editor works, to look at a number of songs and find the ones that worked together to create a tone."

Close Ties is a roots record, in the sense that Crowell himself has deep roots that stretch back into the alternative country scene of the early seventies. But it defies easy classification. Is it country? Is it a songwriter record? Does art need categories? "Well," Crowell says, "when I was a quote-unquote country star for my fifteen minutes of major fame, I hated the label. I bristled at it and got myself in trouble. I would go around to radio stations and that early morning drive-time, chirpy optimism, and I would come across as grumpy. They knew my mind wasn't in the right place. I was an interloper in that world. I didn't fit it. It soon spit me out. In hindsight, it should have: I was no asset to their goal, which was to satisfy their advertisers."

On the other hand, the rise of Americana music struck a nerve with him. "I have declared my loyalty to Americana. It's a hard category for people to get their heads around, or at least the terminology is. But all the people who represent it—Townes van Zandt, Guy Clark, Lucinda Williams, Steve Earle and more recent stars like John Paul White and Jason Isbell—share a common thread, and that thread is poet. Whether they are actual poets or their music exemplifies a poetic sensibility, generally speaking, the Americana artist shuns commercial compromise in favor of a singular vision. Which resonates with me."

One trait of a poet, Crowell explains, involves the careful handling of memory. “A few years ago I made a record called *The Houston Kid* that triggered *Chinaberry Sidewalks*,” he says. “Those memory muscles are pretty strong in me. They have a natural pull. And so many of these songs use those memories as raw material.” They range from songs about Crowell’s childhood in Texas (“East Houston Blues”) to songs about arriving in Nashville as a young songwriter (“Nashville 1972”) to songs about friends (the anguished “Life Without Susanna”) and lovers (the rueful “Forgive Me, Annabelle”). “It’s not always autobiographical memory,” he says. “There’s fictional writing involved in it, too. But it’s all about thinking through the places that I’ve been, and how I might use them as backdrop for reflection. In ‘East Houston Blues,’ for example, I’m talking about the place where I grew up. Central Houston is broken into wards. The Fifth Ward is where Lightnin’ Hopkins came from. The Third is where I come from. Traditionally, the third ward was home to the poor white population, and the song doesn’t shy away from that: it talks about poverty and petty crime but also communicates the joy of music.”

In the simmering “I Don’t Care Anymore,” he reflects ruefully on his current self-confidence (“I don’t care anymore / if I stand out in a crowd”) but only in contrast with earlier incarnations of himself. “That song is based on sketching who I was at my commercial peak, when I had five number one records,” he says. “I had a mullet and I was trying to strut my ass around and make the girls buy my records. I look back on that with some bemusement and a certain amount of sarcasm. I pick on the work more than I should, maybe. In the song, the guy is writing middle-of-the-road songs. That’s not exactly autobiographical. But it’s the feeling of not being completely honest to yourself.”

“It Ain’t Over Yet,” a vocal collaboration with his ex-wife Rosanne Cash and John Paul White, addresses how the passage of time can burnish love. “I don’t care what you think you heard / We’re still learning how to fly,” he sings, and Cash answers with “I’ve known you forever and ever it’s true / If you came by it easy you wouldn’t be you.” The record also features a duet with Sheryl Crow on the haunting “I’m Tied To Ya.” The wisdom of women is never far from Crowell’s mind, either in song or in life. “If you follow my path I think it was there from the start,” he says. “Susanna Clark, who was married to the songwriter Guy Clark, became a very close friend when I was in my early 20s. We weren’t lovers and in fact she offered me more than that. She was this incredibly intelligent, creative woman---and my first ever muse. In my quest to please her artistically, I became a realized songwriter. The same goes for Emmylou Harris whose natural grace has impacted my life since 1975. Then there was my partnership with Rosanne Cash. The marriage ended but from time to time the musical collaboration goes on. My wife now, Claudia, offers the gift of stability to both my personal and professional endeavors. And with four daughters and two grand daughters, my corner of the world is populated by formidable women.”

As he moves into elder-statesman territory, Crowell continues to extend the path carved out by the top-tier songwriters who preceded him. “All are so important,” he said. “Bob Dylan would of course be an archetype, as would Neil Young, Johnny Cash, John Lennon. Every time they release work I find something in it.” He would add a name to the pantheon. “Kris Kristofferson belongs in there, too. He personifies all that intelligence and emotional vulnerability and

magnetism. I spoke about him at Austin City Limits and said he changed the face of Nashville, and he's continued to give us deeply meaningful work like This Old Road."

Fifty years after Crowell first started playing as a teen in Houston garage bands, he still believes in the power of songs, and the responsibility of singing them. "The interesting thing about that garage band back then is that we would go from 'I Saw Her Standing There' by the Beatles to 'Honky Tonkin' by Hank Williams. In southeast Texas those songs fit side by side. 'Drinkin' Wine Spo-de-o-dee' went right next to 'Crossroads' by Cream. That was the beauty of it, that all of that existed side by side." Crowell finds himself going back to that music, but also going even earlier. "Recently, I think—I hope—that my study of the blues is starting to show up in my music. Those artists, whether it's Lightnin' Hopkins or John Lee Hooker or the acoustic Delta players, connected to something fundamental. With that in mind, I'm trying to move forward but also get back there."