

Rodney Crowell – Career Bio

Great songwriters are said to reveal themselves through their work; their candor and transparency of soul is the key to the listener's empathic heart and the culture's admiration. But the lions of country songwriting, idolized and covered in magazines as they are, can sometimes feel like statues carved in marble, not fleshy, visceral human beings who've been scared, scarred and small just like us. And that's why Rodney Crowell, who completed an astonishing personal pilgrimage from great American songwriter to laudable author with his 2011 memoir "Chinaberry Sidewalks," stands apart.

We meet in those pages someone we thought we knew: the wiry and slender guitarist in Emmylou Harris's first Hot Band, the young protégé of Guy Clark and Mickey Newbury, the icy cool country star and Grammy winner of the 1980s, the longtime professional partner and husband of Rosanne Cash, the Cherry Bombs bandmate of Vince Gill and Tony Brown, the comeback kid of the 2000s whose incisive, quasi-autobiographical album cycle secured him a Lifetime Achievement Award for Songwriting from the Americana Music Association. But in "Chinaberry Sidewalks," his acclaimed book, we get a portrait of the artist as young man and boy, a story that's more than incidental to the artist he'd become. We recognize the wrinkles and complexities and wounds that would make his lyrics so relatable and shaded. We discover why Crowell has said that in the genetic mingling of his articulate, word-loving mother and his country musician father, he believes he was born to write songs.

Crowell's work and career sets a benchmark for commercial success and lifelong artistic ambition and integrity in country music. His compositions, including "Til I Gain Control Again," "I Ain't Livin' Long Like This," "Song For The Life" and "Ashes By Now" have been widely and successfully covered by legendary singers. But he led the way as a recording artist, achieving a dazzling run of radio hits in the 1980s, followed by a series of more personal albums in the 2000s that secured his place as much more than a chart topper. He's had songs as an artist or writer in the top ten in every decade since the 1970s, including latter-day landmarks "Please Remember Me" and "Making Memories of Us." He's a Grammy Award winner, a member of the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame and the recipient of the 2009 Lifetime Achievement Award for Songwriting from the Americana Music Association.

Born in 1950, Crowell's life is framed by the most dynamic, prosperous and fraught half century in American history and music. He is the son of a proud, prickly and self-defeating father who starts a honky tonk band, fueled by a love of great songs and poignant delusions of grandeur. His mother is a devout Christian who sacrifices to hold a marriage and family together under a leaky roof in the tropically hot and wet suburbs of Houston. Rodney is resilient, resourceful and giving, whether going to extremes in attempts to de-fuse explosive fights between his parents or holding his mother during epileptic seizures.

His father presses eleven-year-old Rodney into service as the drummer in his rag tag band J.W. Crowell And The Rhythmaires. There, Rodney internalizes the vast catalog of classic songs his father has in his otherwise disorderly head. Also around this time, J-Bo, as his father calls himself, takes Rodney to a package show held in ominous weather at the Magnolia Gardens Bandstand in Channelview, Texas featuring Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis and Johnny Cash. Somewhere between the hot rhythm, the thunderous downpour during Lewis's set and the commanding presence of Cash, Rodney Crowell's compass finds a new North.

Crowell forms his first band in high school and then dabbles with college in Nacogdoches, Texas while playing barroom covers and experimenting with writing songs. His roommate Donovan Cowart is a collaborator and a conduit to the next step, because his brother, Walter Martin Cowart, is a poet and a trucker who passes through town occasionally, sharing his wisdom and his notebooks. Inspired by these talismanic first drafts and jottings, Rodney taps into the romance and allure of the writer's life. Walter Cowart would go on to write "One Paper Kid," which was recorded by Emmylou Harris and others. Rodney and Donovan make a recording together in Crowley, Louisiana that becomes a pretext to Rodney's migration to Nashville in 1972.

Crowell is drawn as if by gravity to the small, fiercely independent and artistically minded clique surrounding Guy Clark, Townes Van Zandt, Mickey Newbury and several others whose standards in songwriting are both daunting and inspiring. Crowell embraces their ethos, and he's a quick study in his new "society of song." But in early '70s Music City, outlets are few. His low paying happy hour gig at the Jolly Ox has a rule against singing original material. One evening, when Music Row kingpins Jerry Reed and Harry Warner are in the bar, Rodney says to hell with that and sings a 24-hour old song called "You Can't Keep Me Here In Tennessee." The bar owner fires him, but Warner offers to record the song the next day. Crowell is invited to the session, and when he arrives early at RCA Studio A, he meets Chet Atkins, who takes an interest in the gobsmacked lad and shows him in detail around the studio. The spark of that day leads to a publishing deal and a modicum of stability.

Crowell writes a number of songs in his early 20s that will become his classics, thanks in large part to the perceptive respect and engagement of Emmylou Harris. The new country star records "Til I Gain Control Again," which leads to their meeting. After he plays rhythm guitar with her in Austin one night, she invites him to move to California in 1975 to join her Hot Band, beginning a lifelong relationship that's proven one of the most fruitful and enriching in Americana music. Harris becomes but one of many artists who record Crowell songs. Even before launching as a recording artist himself, his songwriting is widely acknowledged.

Things move faster. He launches the band The Cherry Bombs with friends Vince Gill and Tony Brown, both of whom are destined for stardom in various sides of the music business. Crowell is signed to Warner Bros. Records and releases his solo debut album *Ain't Living Long Like This*. A year later, in 1979, he marries musical collaborator Rosanne Cash and they begin a family. The records he produces with his wife prove more successful commercially than his own, yet Crowell is undaunted, proud of his role as her producer and as a songwriter of expanding scope, including a breakthrough pop/rock hit in Bob Seger's version of "Shame On The Moon." Crowell releases *But What Will The Neighbors Think* and a self-titled album, whose singles just scratch the Top 30. He leaves Warner Bros. and five years pass before he finds a new chance as a featured recording artist. Columbia Records releases *Street Language*, co-produced with Memphis keyboard legend Booker T. Jones, and though it consolidates his cult following, it languishes commercially.

Had Crowell pursued a major label career a decade or so later, he'd never have survived the waiting game for hits, but widespread admiration for Crowell's work and continued high expectations keep his label with him. And Columbia's patience is rewarded when in 1988 Crowell's album *Diamonds & Dirt* connects with the times in an uncanny way, producing five consecutive No.1 hits at country radio. It's a stunning run of success that makes Rodney Crowell a rather sudden object of desire in the music business.

"I experienced that adulation thing for a moment," he reflects. "You're in that perfect storm. People project this thing on you. I call it the Elvis syndrome." He is old enough at the time to be

wary. “If you accept that projection and start to cobble together an image of yourself based on other people’s longing - if you build that ego structure - you’re in trouble. Or I would be in trouble. The insincerity that started to show itself, I recognized as the enemy of art.”

Thus, his approach to the business and radio grows aloof and, he admits, self-sabotaging. His next two albums for Columbia fail to achieve the heady highs of *Diamonds & Dirt*, and he is dropped from the label. A move to MCA records, under the care of old friend and iconic producer Tony Brown, produces two albums, but they achieve less than hoped. To make matters more complex, his marriage to Rosanne Cash unravels, and he has three daughters. He calls 1993 to 1995 the lowest point in his life and career.

Renewal comes through time and largely stepping away from writing, recording and performing. He gets his kids through school. He dates and marries musician Claudia Church. “I think I was trying to give birth to a legitimate artist,” he says of the period. “I’d proven myself as a songwriter and producer but it took me until the end of that five year period until my voice sounded right to me. I just shut (the music business) down and lived.”

The quiet time leads Crowell toward reflecting on and ultimately writing about his youth and his parents. He strikes up a relationship with acclaimed poet and memoirist Mary Karr, a fellow East Texan who teaches writing at Syracuse University. She encourages and coaches the work that will become “Chinaberry Sidewalks.” Meanwhile, Crowell’s memories take the form of songs as well, and when *The Houston Kid* is released on Sugar Hill Records (a label far removed from the radio-driven ecosystem of major label country music) the press hails it as Crowell’s comeback. It is character-rich and revealing, and it even includes a duet with Crowell’s idol and former father-in-law Johnny Cash. Indeed the record presages a major new phase of Crowell’s career. Two more reflective, searching albums follow, and their thematic and musical coherence leads some critics to call them a trinity, though probably more in the Creole cooking, onions-peppers-celery sense than the father-son-holy ghost sense.

Crowell records a fourth album of memoir-style songs, but he feels the ground has already been covered and he shelves it. To shake up his pattern he turns to canny roots artist Joe Henry as producer. Crowell takes his hand off the wheel and off the recording console. Instead of obsessing over every detail of the mix, he focuses on writing and performing in the studio. Then, “I said ‘see you guys – send me the album.’ And I got *Sex & Gasoline* in the mail. I put it on and said WOW this is great. Why did I wait so long? The only objectivity I brought to that was I was going to play and get out. And I think I really started to come into my own as a singer and guitar player on that record.”

That he’s well into his 50s before granting himself credit as a fully realized singer speaks to the humility and the flavor of ambition that’s fueled Crowell’s career. As the 2000s progress, accumulated recognition of Rodney Crowell bring forth a series of accolades. But the work continues. He makes the album *Kin* as a writing collaboration with Mary Karr, on which a range of remarkable artists and friends take vocal turns, including Norah Jones, Vince Gill and Lucinda Williams. The collaborative ethic continues as he makes *Old Yellow Moon*, a long-awaited duet album with his old muse and friend Emmylou Harris. It is recognized as the Americana Music Association Album of the Year and their duo, elevated by an extensive and well-received tour, is also an AMA winner. With a new album titled *Tarpaper Sky* coming in the Spring of 2014, Rodney Crowell is in full voice and fully engaged in his musical present and future.