

Q&A



Joe Kwon, Scott Avett, Bob Crawford, Seth Avett

THE AVETT BROTHERS

Material for the folk favorites' latest album proved an easy find

"WE REALLY OVERDID IT, RECORDING all those songs," laughs Scott Avett. He's talking about the band's new album, *Magpie and the Dandelion*, which is composed almost entirely of songs recorded during their 2011 sessions with producer Rick Rubin for their last album, *The Carpenter*.

"After we put out *The Carpenter*, we knew the songs we didn't use were great in their own right," says bassist Bob Crawford. "We didn't know what to do with them, but then four months ago, Rick started sequencing them together. We listened and realized we had a solid album."

The only addition was a live version of an older tune. Taped during a 2012

show in North Carolina, "Souls Like the Wheels" showcases Scott's brother Seth Avett on vocals. "We wanted to go back to what Gillian Welch or Simon and Garfunkel had done, placing live tracks on studio albums," says Scott. "'Souls Like the Wheels' was a no-brainer. It was the only time Seth performed that song live, and I thought it wasn't only beautiful, but conceptually relevant to the record."

Nearly a dozen years after forming, the Avett Brothers have come a long way from the scrappy trio that played local dives. "We've got a full band now—a drummer, a cellist and a keyboardist. We're realizing the musicianship we have at our fingertips,"

Crawford enthuses. "I think this is a new chapter for us." Avett adds, "The best of what we'll do is ahead—we're excited by that."

When did you realize you had another album's worth of material in the *Carpenter* sessions?

AVETT: At first we figured the material we didn't use would eventually come out as vinyl singles or online content. After we released *The Carpenter*, we were reviewing the extra songs, and in the process we started seeing it as something that stood alone.

CRAWFORD: We recorded about 32 songs for *The Carpenter*. But when we were threading together the concept of

that record it was like editing a story: Some things were great but didn't fit the storyline. That editing process led to the creation of *Magpie and the Dandelion*.

How is this record different?

CRAWFORD: It came out heavier than we would have expected. *The Carpenter* is a heavy album in attitude and subject matter, but in a lot of ways, *Magpie* is even heavier. But it was like a hidden treat that we didn't know we had in a lot of ways.

AVETT: The more cynical songs like "Skin and Bones" and "Morning Song" are both triggered by my take on things. I hate to say it, but we're not really eaten up with positivity. We face a lot of challenges, and in the past we aspired to bring something positive into what we do. But it's necessary to have a vehicle for the cynical nature that's always haunting us.

What were the original sessions like?

CRAWFORD: It took us from January to October 2011 to record all the songs, but we did it piecemeal. We'd be in the studio for 10 days, then we'd be on the road, and then we'd go home for a week. We're a touring band, so instead of taking time off and holing up in a studio, we'd record, then take it with us. We'd review what we did, Rick would listen and give his notes on it, then we'd come back and work some more. It's good to have that luxury of time to work. When you come back to the songs, you often see things a little differently.

How has your creative process with Rick Rubin developed?

AVETT: When we make records, we have the attitude that whatever we do next has got to be better than last time. That's a mindset Seth and I had before we met Rick, but to have him onboard with us just fuels our fire. We're all kind of hopeless dreamers, which allows creativity and discovery. Rick feeds off of that—he loves discovering music and sounds.

CRAWFORD: It's become a great friendship. He has an amazing ear for music for a guy who doesn't play. If you're ever listening to music with him, you see him take it in and it just pours back out of him. He has been a powerful member of the team because of the way he can break down a song. In the case of *Magpie*, we didn't know what we had. He put those songs together the way they are. And though Rick's not onstage with us, he's an essential member of the band. When the relationship began, we were a little nervous about walking into the studio with a

legend. A few days into recording *I and Love and You*, much of that faded away. We were just working with this guy Rick who's very knowledgeable and happy to share what he's learned. We feel very comfortable in the studio with him now.

How do you write and arrange?

AVETT: It's different every time, but what's right for the song tends to find us. We've grown in that, for example, I can spend five hours on a drum part and then our drummer, Mike Marsh, will come in and spend 30 minutes on a better drum part. Even if I spent five hours on it and exhausted myself, the most important thing is what's best for the song. It's about giving up one's ego and one's self in the studio. That said, the conceptual root of each song hinges on the person who initiated it. It was understood that for "Morning Song," everything would pretty much have to be signed off on by me. In that song, the arrangement called for a

I don't even know it anymore. With a few lines and maybe a different melody, we have a new multilayered song.

How has the band evolved?

AVETT: As the crowds have grown, we've had to adjust to bring the audience a show that's exciting on a big level, but also stays personal. We have to accept that it's different from Doc and Merle Watson sitting onstage and playing, which is a true love of mine that I long to get back to. We put a lot of our chips into performing live. In a lot of ways, everything else can fall by the wayside. As long as we can play live, we'll continue to grow and change. It used to be just Seth and Bob and me going into a bar or coffee shop and just belting it out. We've changed quite a bit since then. We go through waves—as the band and sound get bigger, we simplify it a bit. Then it grows again. Crop and grow. As long as we're moving, it's good.

CRAWFORD: When we started, we were



Onstage in L.A., 2013

group of people singing at the end. I didn't want it to be a choir, so we invited family and friends into the studio, a few at a time, to sing on the track.

Seth and I write separately. Lately I'll give him a list of ideas that are halfway finished, or maybe just a melody or a line concept. Then he goes through and brainstorms, maybe spends several months with them, and brings songs that have progressed or finished. Sometimes there will be a song that I mostly wrote, and

'When we started, we were three guys onstage—raw with crazy energy!'

—Bob Crawford

three guys onstage—raw with crazy energy, like a monkey in a tree. Now we want to be a band that's tight. It doesn't matter so much about being physical for the sake of being physical as much as being able.

—Juli Thanki



'We have the attitude that whatever we do next has got to be better than last time.' —Scott Avett