

Q&A



Eli Sanders

RODNEY CROWELL

A unique teaming with poet Mary Karr brings it all back home

AFTER MORE THAN THREE DECADES, 13 solo albums and collaborations with some of music's greatest names, Rodney Crowell knows a born songwriter when he sees one—even if that particular songwriter has never written a song. When he read poet and memoirist Mary Karr's 1995 book *The Liars' Club*, he couldn't help but see the parallels between himself and the author—they grew up within 60 miles of each other in East Texas homes heavy with alcohol and violence. He also detected a writerly voice that would lend itself to musical accompaniment. "I thought, 'This girl could write songs,'" recalls

Crowell, 61, who released his own memoir, *Chinaberry Sidewalks*, last year.

Crowell signaled his fandom by name-checking Karr in his 2003 song "Earthbound." "I'm actually kind of a hermit," admits Karr, 57, "but I said to him, 'Why don't we meet for a drink or something?'" After several years spent building a solid friendship, the two finally began writing songs together. The result is *Kin*, a Joe Henry-produced album of Crowell/Karr originals sung by an all-star cast including Norah Jones, Kris Kristofferson, Lucinda Williams, Vince Gill, Lee Ann Womack, Emmylou Harris and Crowell's ex-wife, Rosanne Cash. Up next

for Crowell, whose most recent solo album is 2008's *Sex & Gasoline*, is another team-up: his first-ever full album of duets with Harris, with whom he has worked on and off since the mid-1970s. "We're close to having it done," he reports. "Some of the songs I wrote when we were kids, songs we always said we should do. Thirty-five years later, we're doing it." For now, we spoke with Crowell and Karr about their groundbreaking blending of poetry and music.

How did you start writing together?

CROWELL: We talked on the phone and Mary said, "If the law don't want you, neither

do I." I'd say "That's a song," and she'd say "Well, then, write it." I wrote a verse, got a melody going and sent it to her. Up on my email screen a second verse appeared. I wrote a little more, and that verse came back altered and revised. Then she sent the last verse. I said, "We need a bridge," and next thing you know we've got a song—and in a very short time. I said, "This works so well, I'm coming to New York and we'll do this face to face." In the first day we wrote two songs. It was that easy. Before long we had 15 songs. We'd laugh and talk, and out of that would come songs.

Did she require encouragement?

CROWELL: She'd say, "Oh, I don't know how to do that." But she's a language scholar. She can cuss like a sailor and destroy the English language with Southeast Texas-speak, and at the same time converse with the editor of *The Paris Review*. She has language. Language belongs to her.

KARR: I'd say, "Why don't you write a song with Guy Clark, Emmylou or Vince Gill?" I'm a big music fan, but didn't see myself as having much to contribute. I fell in love with the songwriting process. Rodney's a great coach. He's so loving and patient that he draws out the best in people. It's why people like Vince Gill say, "Whatever Rodney wants me to do, I'll do it." He has a way of encouraging you, like getting a kid to go off the high dive.

Did Mary contribute music?

CROWELL: In the beginning I was providing the melody. As time went on, Mary's confidence as a songwriter started to emerge. She started singing melodies to me that I would interpret. Her confidence started to soar with these songs—it was cool to watch her articulate a melody.

KARR: I'd occasionally offer input. I know what I don't know, but I'm also opinionated. I can't help it.

How did you pick the singers?

CROWELL: It started with Norah Jones. She had recorded one of my songs ["Bull Rider"] and I was so smitten with it that I wanted her to sing one of our songs. I sent her a few and she picked "If the Law Don't Want You, Neither Do I." At the same time I was talking to Emmy, and she said she wanted to do "Long Time Girl Gone By." That naturally sorted itself out. Knowing Rosanne as well as I do, and knowing that she has sisters, I thought she would be perfect for "Sister Oh Sister." Because Mary doesn't sing, we had female singers, and then I said, "Well, this'll

be imbalanced if I do all the male narratives." So I went to see my friend Vince, and then the idea to have Kris sing the father's part in "My Father's Advice" seemed like natural casting to me.

What was recording like?

CROWELL: Joe Henry called when he heard that I was thinking about making this record. He had produced *Sex & Gasoline*, and I knew he was the man for this. Joe's very articulate, a poet and a reader like myself. We set up in a circle and for the most part didn't use headphones, just sang and played live. What you hear on that record is what was sung and played. We added a few things later—a

out of there, and yet in some ways neither of us ever left.

Are songwriting and prose similar?

CROWELL: Only in the work ethic. You've got to have an imagination, and maybe the genetic predisposition to want to tell stories. Part of my education as a songwriter was to read constantly. But I learned the hard way over a long period of time that in song you can act words out, imply sarcasm, have a big ol' metaphor and make it work by the way you sing it. But on the page, with the intimacy of the writer and the reader, songwriting tricks don't work. Also with writing songs, you need to speed up the storytelling because



Deborah Feingold

Mary Karr, Rodney Crowell

fiddle, maybe a harmony here and there. But for the most part, 90 percent of the record is exactly what happened.

How important is East Texas as the setting for the album?

CROWELL: That's one of the things that captured me about Mary. She had so beautifully written about that place, and I understood every nuance. It was like my childhood was being handed to me. There's a unique sense of humor, and there's a rhythm to the colloquial and vernacular that informs the humor.

KARR: We both grew up in that same little stretch. We both were dying to get

'Mary is a language scholar. Language belongs to her'

you've got three minutes. With writing prose, you've got to slow the storytelling down.

Will you do this again?

CROWELL: I think Mary's got the bug. We're going to tour together, which will be fun. We'll start getting ideas about some other songs that we want to make. Whether it will be *Kin II*, I don't know. I imagine we'll chase something in another direction.

—Juli Thanki



'We set up in a circle and didn't use headphones, just sang and played live.'