

CRACKER JACK OF ALL TRADES, DAVID LOWERY



David Lowery isn't afraid to cause offense. When his band, **Cracker**, sparred with Virgin Records he sang that the label could "suck itself." Lowery has a well-established skill for provocation: "I Hate My Generation" the opening track from *The Golden Age* is a definitive anti-anthem. Lowery currently masterminds two bands: Camper Van Beethoven, eclectic stalwarts from California that date back to the early 1980s; and Cracker, the garage rock slackers with a sardonic worldview. Lowery is the constant in both acts, with his versatile songwriting and raspy voice, which is at once defiant and vulnerable. (LEFT: PHOTO BY JASON THRASHER)

Cracker's new album, *Sunrise in the Land of Milk and Honey* (429/Savoy Records), finds the band in renewed dynamic form. "We All Shine A Light" has visceral guitar hooks and an insistent beat, while "Friends" contains Lowery's trademark wry lyrics—"I'd like to apologize for my slightly wicked thoughts." I spoke with Lowery after Cracker's vigorous performance at the High Line Ballroom, which ended with a rousing version of "Low," complete with an accordion solo, of all things. We discussed the dangers of maturity and what it takes to survive 25 years on the road.

DAVID COGGINS: Your tour bus broke down earlier. It's been a long day for you.

DAVID LOWERY: Touring is pretty complex. Something goes wrong with your bus every six or eight weeks—just not usually before your New York show.

DC: Is it easy to get motivated to tour?

DL: It's more difficult at times. You get hypersensitive, like when the sounds too loud. When it's your first year on tour you wouldn't notice that. After 25 years you get weirdly picky and that's what you have to overcome. It's not about getting bored with it. I enjoy the traveling part. We go all over the world and we will again with this record. I'm excited to go to Toronto even though I have to get up at 5 in the morning to do some television thing and we don't get done playing until 2 that night.

DC: You joked during the concert that the new record, *Sunrise In the Land of Milk and Honey*, is your 'acoustic folksy album.' Of course it's not like that at all.

DL: In general there's an arc, or gravitational pull, in rock music and as you get older the arc wants to bend towards being softer and introspective. Sometimes it's fun to play with that. Overall it's really my mission to resist that and remain immature on some level. Maturity is the enemy of the rock musician.

DC: You never seem to do the expected thing. You have distance from the industry.

DL: I've always lived apart from the normal music scene, in towns that weren't New York or Chicago or Los Angeles or Seattle.

DC: You live in Richmond, Virginia.

DL: That's been helpful. I don't really follow what's going on right now. I don't look at music in a two or three year window—I look at it in a twenty- or thirty-year sweep. Of course you have to be careful, a lot of people become slavishly devoted to the past. You don't want to sound retro but you don't want to sound desperately modern.

DC: How do your Camper Van Beethoven records sound to you now?

DL: Sometimes I think, "Couldn't I have taken a Sudafed before I sang that song?"

DC [Laughing]: Because the vocals sound nasal?

DL: That's the main thing. There wasn't a high expectation for my vocals to be good. By the end, on the record "Key Lime Pie" the engineers thought: "Maybe he can sing."

DC: You wrote "Sick of Goodbyes" with Mark Linkous of Sparklehorse, and it appeared on his album *Good Morning Spider* and on the Cracker record *Kerosene Hat*. It was interesting to hear the two different versions of the same song. You learn about both of you.

DL: There's a song on the new album—"Darling One," which we wrote together.

DC: Do you know him from Virginia?

DL: Yeah. Well, Mark was our roadie from our early days in Cracker. I played under the name "David Charles" on his first two records. Anytime you see that name it's me—usually the guitarist and the bass player. A lot of people don't know that. He was the first person I met when I moved to Richmond.

DC: In the audience tonight people had requests for very specific songs they wanted to hear. And people got revved up for the two accordion solos—I don't think I've seen that before.

DL: I don't know what that was about. The live version of "Low" gets a bit rowdy.

DC: You also write very slow sad songs. I had a friend in college who used to listen to "Big Dipper" when he was depressed. It's a good song to drink whiskey to.

DL: I go through periods where I write different types of songs. I don't belong in the front of a band, the natural part of my personality is more the mad scientist. So generally my personality is reflected in melancholy reflective songs like that. But it's also natural for me to write these up-tempo rocker songs. It's hard to write those melancholy songs.

DC: You tour separately with Camper Van Beethoven and Cracker.

DL: That band works better when we just do a few shows now and again.

DC: Why did you get back together?

DL: We genuinely like playing together and we like each other's company.

DC: When do you know if you're writing a Cracker song or a Camper Van Beethoven song?

DL: 90% of the time it's at the beginning. I can tell if it's a Cracker riff. I look through my book of Things I've Overheard. I keep a list of things I've overheard or find myself saying and find something that fits with the music and then I come up with a character and try to let that character speak.

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