

BUDDY

THE ORIGINAL TEXAS MUSIC MAGAZINE
APRIL 2017
VOLUME XXXXIV, NUMBER 10

A bold new stop

The Old 97's release the new *Graveyard Whistling* replete with all the edgy artistry that has defined them for more than two decades and available on Vinyl and CD
by Shawn D. Henderson

SEEING THE OLD 97'S TWENTY YEARS ago, you would swear you were watching an ethereal sort of train wreck, pretty sure that what you could hear frenetically lifting off the tracks was going to come down really hard, really fast and really soon.

That kind of energy never dissipates easily into longevity in the music business, or does it? With the release of *Graveyard Whistling* late last month, the Old 97's continue along that gravity-defying upward arc replete with all the edgy artistry that's defined them for more than two decades.

Perhaps even more impressive than just being alive and still imaginative, creative and productive is the fact that the Old 97's lineup is the same today as it was during your misspent early adult years off Lower Greenville Avenue. The Old 97's have really only added an apostrophe, as the band continues to be fronted by Rhett Miller on vocals and rhythm guitar, Murry Hammond on bass and vocals, Ken Bethea on lead guitar and Phillip Peeples on the drums.

The laws of liquor, time and space might convince you that the band's creative abilities might be geographically squeezed beyond utility with Miller homesteading in New York, Hammond out in Los Angeles and Bethea and Peeples maintaining the 50% share required to retain their true Dallas icon status.

As Ken Bethea related, it's not a huge issue, "we're all really good friends, and this is a family at this point. Once you have that and there's a shared focus of what your music is about, and you get along then things just work. Sure, it's a little clunky that Rhett and Murry don't live in Dallas anymore, but it would be a lot worse if they had drug problems or whatever. Our problems can be solved with a plane ticket."

Meet in the middle

THE BAND HAD TO MEET somewhere in the middle to follow up 2014's *Most Messed Up*. The Old 97's convened last year in tiny Tornillo, Texas, where they recorded their 1996 major label debut, *Too Far To Care*. With everyone in the room and face to face, they took a bagful of wordsmith Miller's songs and hammered out and crafted the eleven tracks that would eventually become *Graveyard Whistling* with producer Vance Powell.

Not too many songwriters can

weave "misanthrope" or "facsimile" into a lyric and pull it off without seeming like they had been blindly thumbing through a thesaurus.

Miller manages to pull them off in thoughtful, multisyllabic phrases that deliver an edgy literate left cross that will surprise you after relentless hooks, jabs and straight punches from the rest of his writing. When he borrows from others, he does so with dexterity and skill, whether taking a line from JRR Tolkien or JayZ. Miller's theology might not be quite orthodox, but his writing skills remain formidable.

All that to say the Old 97's is creatively still very much a band. There's a very good reason that the lines for open mic poetry

readings are pretty short. It's the same reason coffee houses hold about ten people and bars hold hundreds. Even with Miller's lyrics, you listen to the Old 97's because of the whole package. It takes a village to raise a song. Crammed into an east Texas studio, the Old 97's put all of their creative energies and talents into creating music from chaos. Without Ken Bethea's guitar work, seamlessly shifting the tone and mood of the body of work, and building a soundscape with Murry Hammond's bass and Phillip Peeples' drum set; the Old 97's wouldn't sound like the Old 97's.

Densely packed with greatness

Graveyard Whistling is densely packed with greatness. The first song to be released was "Good With God" featuring Brandii Carlile in the title role, which you've probably already heard and enjoyed, but it would be a shame to miss the full body of

work for the singles you might hear on the radio. The Old 97's still generate songs that benefit from high octane, ethanol-based environments like "Drinkin' Song" and "Irish Whiskey Pretty Girls" then shift into to introspective themes without missing a beat. Like all of the music the Old 97's has released over the years, *Graveyard Whistling* is great out of the box, but better after you've listened to it a few times to absorb all it has to offer.

My favorite, which I will admit that I creepily listened to in a loop over and over for too long, was "All Who Wander." If you want to hear and feel everything that is great about the Old 97's, just do the same. It's brilliantly written and musically just about perfect. Take my word for it; I am an official music critic. "She Hates Everybody" is another great song that rounds out an album full of great music. It's so much easier to say bad things about people, but honestly, I just really like the whole thing, so forgive

me for overuse of the word great (you can count them, I think it's eleven through the course of the article, I'll buy my own thesaurus next month).

In addition to a great new album, this month, the Old 97's will host the second, now hopefully annual, Old 97's County Fair on April 8 in the heart of Downtown Dallas at Main Street Garden. This year's one-day festival features a lineup equally unique and impressive as year one. Before the Old 97's close the day out, icons and artists like Lucinda Williams and Mavis Staples will headline a solid bill that will also feature The Jayhawks, Jonathan Tyler, Lydia Loveless, Vandoliers and The Texas Gentlemen. Opening the festival will be The Ticket's own Gordon Keith, who reportedly earned a spot on the roster after a blood feud with local Bird Dogs' front man Jub.

Each one of the acts on the lineup would be worth a trip to see individually, to have eight or

nine of them in a row make the day one to circle on the calendar and plan a weekend around. I would go just to see The Texas Gentlemen, a local music collective that I've actually only read about in the paper, for the first time. All reports from friends and fans indicate that it's something you just have to see for yourself. The Old 97's County Fair has all the makings of a required cultural event for a city still lacking a really cool thing to look forward to outside of the State Fair. They are even bringing in real carnies, just to get you through the six months to September.

It's looking more and more like the train wreck you thought you'd see in the late 90's just isn't going to happen. Even divided now between two coasts, Dallas can still claim the Old 97's as its own. It's a good thing that age and time has afforded the Old 97's to still create with the same level of energy, intensity and artistry without running off the tracks. It's much better to convey or experience the power of a runaway train than it is to be the train wreck.

Between the new album and the perfect venue to see it performed live, there are three things on the list for April if you haven't already checked the off the list. Buy yourself a tangible, physical copy of the Old 97's newest release *Graveyard Whistling*, available on vinyl and CD from Bloodshot Records. Download a version for the car from iTunes. And finally, buy a few tickets for the Old 97's County Fair at the Main Street Garden on April 8. For more information on the festival, look them up at old97s.com ■



Guitarist Ken Betha and bassist Murray Hammond are both *Buddy* Texas Tornados and join Rhett Miller (vocalist and rhythm guitar) and drummer Phillip Peeples: the Old 97's