



Cracker - Milk & Honey With David Lowery
By Joanne Schenker
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On May 5th, Cracker fans awoke to Sunrise In The Land Of Milk And Honey –and like a shot of caffeine, it was just the jolt they needed. It's three years since their Greenland CD and the roots-rock sensibilities and country-punk persuasions of the band have returned with a vengeance. And so has frontman David Lowery's wit and razor-sharp realism, as he sets the alarm clock for our rude awakening. After years of what Lowery describes as "American affluence and indulgence", it's time to reign it all in. With the economy tanking, so are the dreams and hopes in our land of milk and honey. It may all seem like one big bummer, but these 11 tracks radiate with riveting punk-glam and alt-country cadence – the trademark qualities that have given Cracker its crunch for nearly 20 years.

Signing with a new record label (Savoy/429 Records) Cracker returns with the usual suspects: Lowery's long-time partner, Johnny Hickman, drummer Frank Funaro and bassist Sal Maida, plus the addition of noted producer/engineer, David Barbe (Drive By Truckers). Taking a new approach to their creative process, Sunrise is a collaborative effort by all four bandmates. Surprisingly self-disciplined, they took one week every two months between tours to write together over the course of a year. The result was a creative outpouring with a strong common thread – all four musicians came of age playing in the origins of punk and new wave and once again found those sounds rising up.

With a tour in support of Sunrise and a good amount of Camper Van Beethoven concerts in between, his first solo CD dropping early next year, and maybe another CVB album...is there ever any downtime for Lowery? We caught him during of those rare moments...

How are you today?

I'm fine...just making a pot of tea and waiting for my kids to come home from school.

And where is home?

I live in Richmond, Virginia. I'm right on the edge of the city. If you went a few blocks, you'd be in suburbia, but it's pretty much like suburbia.

Speaking of suburbia tell me about the single, "Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out With Me."

I was playing with this idea that I heard through a lot of my friends in the last year and half or two...sort of this sentiment that society kinda screwed up or this life that we positioned ourselves for isn't exactly what we wanted. Materialism. Living in the suburbs. Going to the mall. Whatever job you ended up with ...whatever it is...this prevailing sense of "what exactly am I doing with my life?" I played with that idea and then it sorta mixed in with this paranoid, doom-and-gloom, civilization-as-we-know-it-is-going-to-hell idea. And then the actual fact that western civilization has sort of collapsed with the economy right now and stuff like that. So, it's just playing with that whole palette of sentiment and we ran it into a song. The great thing is it struck a nerve with a lot of people when we started showing the video of the song...

And the title, Sunrise In The Land Of Milk and Honey?

Well, I would like to say we had a grand concept, but actually the record company asked us for a title before we really knew what the record was going to be called. Basically, we looked at all the songs and that particular song looked like what we considered a title for an album, so we called it that. I think it gets a little too like the "zeitgeist" that I was just talking about in that you have this general sense from people that they're feeling like we lived in this one world and now we woke up and it isn't exactly the way we thought it was.

You've said the album has a time stamp on it from about 1979 – 1983...

That's the era when the four of us started playing our own original music in bands...it was the common ground for all of us. There were a lot of things we worked on for this record and these 11 songs were what we obviously thought were the strongest. They all tended to have some sort of element from that time period and I think that's the shared musical heritage we have between us.

Writing religiously between tours for one year had to be difficult. Especially as a writer, you can't always create on a time clock...it has to just come to you.

I actually find that you can create on a time clock, but you just have to be willing to throw a lot of stuff away and that's what we did. We would meet at studio around 10 o'clock and our goal was to make two pieces of music everyday and take them to the point where they were structured with a verse and a chorus. Even if there weren't any words and there was just music, we just wanted to feel like we got somewhere. After doing that for a while, there was a pool of music that we really liked. And in some ways, we actually came up with some better stuff by digging around and finding the music rather than waiting for it to hit us.

Did you have a time frame in mind?

We gave ourselves about a year or so to write it. That's probably why so many songs are combinations of other songs. There was a ton of "this part of this song works really well with that part of that song". And we ended up throwing away the few original ideas and combining it into one. We recorded it relatively fast, though.

How fast?

All in all about five weeks. That's pretty fast for Cracker.

On the song, "I Could Be Wrong, I Could Be Right", Johnny (Hickman) says "When I hand David a melody like this, I have no idea where he's going to take it." What did he mean by that?

Well, he did that little riff in the beginning of the song and then we all came up with the repeating thing: "Darlin' don't you go, don't you look down in that hole" ... and I think it was originally part of another song he was writing, but I didn't know that at the time. So we worked on that riff and then added two more sections to it. The riff became less bluesy-soulful and more like a surf riff with a harder driving beat behind it. We half-timed it and made it more of a blues-rock thing and I guess it ended up to be something completely different than where he started. But, that's what collaboration is all about.

In one article, you've referred to Johnny as being the "real redneck" and yourself as the faux redneck...

Well, kind of (laughs). He's the guy who did live in Bakersfield and tried to break into the Dwight Yoakam-Merle Haggard-California-country scene. He really did work that for a couple years right before we got together in Cracker. I think this sort of sums up why Cracker sounds the way we do - we would drive from the Redlands which in the late '70's and early '80's was the very fringes of Los Angeles. It wasn't an urban center - there were farms and ranches. It was a different kind of California than what most people imagine. We would drive to L.A. to see Black Flag or some punk band and on the way out there we'd listen to Merle Haggard or some sort of country music or vice versa...listening to the punk rock while we were driving out to see Dwight Yoakam and there were a lot of people like that in our circles. Camper Van Beethoven has that dynamic too, in that Jonathan Segel (the violin player) grew up in Davis. That was real farm country, so he grew up playing folk, bluegrass and hillbilly music.

Do you all participate in the writing process?

Not usually, but in this record we tried to. In the past, the band was set up in these three sort of circles - there would be the two of us (Johnny and I) singer and lead guitar player -- basically the

songwriting team. Then there's a second circle around us, which is the people we play with live. And a third, looser circle, which is the people we collaborate with...it might be another band or engineers we work with in our studio or our friends. But we kind of formalized that...that's why when you see all the past Cracker records it was just me and Johnny with quite a big cast of characters. This record on the other hand, is strictly with the live band instead of the larger pool of people that we usually play with.

Was it easier with less people "cooking in the kitchen"?

Easier in some ways, but it took longer in other ways because Johnny and I have always had the liberty of playing with different people when we record so it was this looser concept of a band...which I notice a lot of other bands have taken this same approach. For instance, look at what Broken Social Scene is...it's a whole loose group of people. In some ways it's quicker for us to do that because we say, "Oh hey, check this riff out. I got these words for this and Miguel or David should play this with us" and bang -- it's done. But when you're working with the same four people, you have to throw out a lot more ideas because a certain beat or feel isn't necessarily gonna be the most obvious thing to develop for those two guys who play bass and drums with you every day. This record was specifically designed and written around the way Frank and Sal play, so it got recorded faster, but took longer to write.

What was it about 429 Records that made you want to sign with them?

Frankly, when Cracker's making a record, we've almost never had much interaction from our record label. I don't know if we've just been fortunate or whatever. The most we've ever had from Virgin was, "we need a few more up tempo songs" you know? I really like the people at 429. I feel like it's a real record label in an old school way. Most musicians would know what I'm talking about. With 429 it's not about being the hippest, coolest band. It's about getting the record out to your fans and the people who really like you. They're not trying to 'brand' you in a way that you're not.

I remember Virgin Records left a bad taste in your mouth ...

It's not so much that I was really that pissed at them. It's a multi-national corporation and it's gonna do what it thinks it needs to do in its own best interest. And they hold the rights to the music of literally thousands of artists. I did feel it was a little rude that they put out our greatest hits (Get On This: Best of Cracker) record without asking us, but I think we pretty much crushed them in that battle because we put out our own album on the same day they did...and ours did much better. Partly because we were smart enough to call ours Greatest Hits. Our goal was to get a cease and desist letter from Virgin and we did...but there was nothing they could do about it.

This time around you played new songs in concert before committing them to digitally. Would you do it again?

Yeah, I think so because it made the recording process simpler. We knew how the songs wentwe didn't go in there and have to change the beat. Although we did actually radically change "Turn On, Tune In". We had the album recorded and something about that song was bugging me, so I did a really quick demo of it and played it for Johnny and David Barbe and then I did a quick demo on my own and I asked them if my second demo was a better way for the song to be arranged and they thought it was. So we went back and re-recorded that song when we were mixing. It became the single, so I guess we were right.

I see you're on Facebook and fans can follow you guys on Twitter. Quite different from the 80's...or is it?

Well, exactly. It's different from the '80's in that it's much easier to maintain a grass roots following now. But we basically tried all of this networking back then, just in a different way. We collected people's addresses, we had mailing lists, we had a newsletter. We went around to the college radio stations, which to us back in the early '80's was our underground blog. We would play on the college

stations and then do a show in the college towns and there was this belief that we would associate ourselves with like-minded people, which is a lot like the social networking tools of today.

There was something about the popularity of the college radio station back in the 80's that made music so special. Students today have no idea what that was like...

I'll tell you what it was. College radio in the '80's was very egalitarian...it was about playing pop music for our generation. I think it's more elitist now. Like, "Hey we're going to play this stuff now that isn't pop" or something like that. Whereas before, it was our own conception of pop music. I was a college radio DJ through much of the early '80's, so I remember what it was like.

Where did you DJ?

I started DJ-ing in 1978 at a station called KUOR in Redlands, California. I was actually in high school and I went to their orientation meeting and never said that I was a student and I got my own show (laughs).

So you were at the edge of the whole punk scene with The Ramones and The Clash?

Yes, exactly. When we first started playing our own original music that was the music we were trying to emulate. That's why this record has a feel of that era because it's kinda a genesis for the four of us.

That's why I love "Hand Me My Inhaler". It brings me right back to those CBGB days. Did you get to play there?

I played there with Camper Van Beethoven a few times. They had the worst bathrooms of any club in the entire universe (laughs). I've been to many countries in the world, but that was the worst of any nightclub.

Mercury Lounge is up there for gross bathrooms too!

Yes, definitely. Speaking of New York, we'll actually be playing at the Highline on June 25th. We went back and forth between the Bowery and the Highline, but the Highline was available on the day that worked the best for us.

...and Camper Van Beethoven. Any news?

Well, we still play about two dozen shows a year. We should be starting to work on a new record soon. It's been a while. It was 2004 since we did the last one. But I've got my Cracker thing going and a solo record that's almost finished. I guess that's next on the agenda.

You've got a full plate. How fortunate after 30 years of playing...

I definitely agree. I think right now is a good time for us. Some people want to compare raw record sales or the number of people you play for at one time, but that doesn't necessarily make us enjoy playing the show any more, you know what I'm saying? Right now I feel like we're regarded very highly...we have this legacy and we weren't always respected that way. So it's enjoyable to play music now when people feel that way about us.

Joanne Schenker lives in New York and is a contributing writer for Glide and freelance writes about music and the arts for several other publications. She can be reached at jogirl621@aol.com.