

PHANTOM POWER, A Guided Tour

Fall is upon us here in Southern California, and I have to tell you that that can mean almost anything: crisp days, cracked gray skies with a pale *El Greco blue* glimpsed between them; or high desert winds blowing like the hand dryer in a truck stop gent's room, curling the leaves of liquid ambers that refuse to turn, and lifting the capes of staggered trick-or-treaters --cloaked, hooded, and trying desperately, like the rest of us, to pretend it is otherwise.

There may be some struggle implied in all that, but I am no stranger to it, or to the aforementioned *pretense*: it is my business, in fact, to paddle canoes up stream (or at least to rhythmically call out "stroke!" with encouragement while others do so), and to sustain all manner of theatre and disguise. Music is nothing if not pure illusion, after all, but it is our most powerful one. It is only real when in the air. Like faith and hope, it can be elusive or unshakeable; like time and love it can be terrifying or endlessly life affirming. Or it can be all these things, and all at once. So much for the weather report...

Before meeting Rodney Crowell I knew about him what maybe *you* know about him: I knew he'd had many hits --as an artist, songwriter and producer. I knew he had been married more than once and had four daughters. I knew one of those wives was a woman possessing a formidable gift of her own, and knew that their union had afforded him much successful collaboration and a father-in-law as imposing as The Lincoln Memorial to even the most promising rail-splitter.

I knew Rodney's face too, of course, and could see a flurry of familiar images flip before me when I imagined it: boyish, lean and affable to begin with; taut and suspicious as the years went on. And I knew many of his song. Even ones I didn't *know* I knew. Thus when an introduction had been brokered between us and he flew out for our first meeting over dinner, I was just cheeky enough to think I had him figured.

I didn't, exactly. He was polite and soft-spoken, but percolated with a nervous energy. He challenged me to flinty conversation and was brazenly forthcoming about himself. After a long meal we adjourned back to my house where he played me several songs he'd recorded

that were shy of his intent and satisfaction. His points well made, I thought the evening might be over; but now excited, he produced a deeply scarred Martin parlor guitar and proceeded to strum through six or seven more songs, each superior to anything he'd attempted in the studio. It was almost as if he'd avoided these songs...had protected them from a process he himself didn't quite believe in. What Rodney had in mind, it seemed, was to set aside all the work he'd been doing in Nashville for the better part of a year and rethink his method of operation entirely. In retrospect I understand that what he was after was the sort of deliberate, self-imposed disorientation that every career artist –from Rimbaud to Thelonious Monk- has pursued at some point in their trajectory; and to that end, he proposed arriving on my doorstep for a quick series of sessions that would find him wrung out from the road, leaving the comforts of familiarity behind, ready to disappear into my basement studio and into whatever might be going on down there.

Fine by me. As luck would have it, what was “going on down there” was the musical equivalent to a weekly poker game between a moody but amiable group of friends and co-workers. When Rodney sat in, he called crazy new games then dealt the cards all face-up; and the musicians, to a man, threw down fearlessly, like only people do when they know they're exposed and are playing with someone else's money.

Now, *you* might not call it gambling when I can see your hand showing, but I admired Rodney for his nerve and imagination, and for trusting a room full of strangers while the queen of hearts was falling out of his sleeve. Songs tumbled one into the next, and as much meaning resides in their terse dark river of sound as in their lyrics. What transpired, then, over a very few days was, to borrow from Emerson, not about filling a bucket but starting a fire: It was about taking hold and about letting go; about accountability. About unreasonable reason. About anger and redemption, fear and trembling, trial and error and forgiveness and reconciliation. About taking stock and not looking back. Rodney laid a lot of things bare while here in my company, then he set a match to it. He gave it whatever he had as fuel and tender; and what *took* is still burning.

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