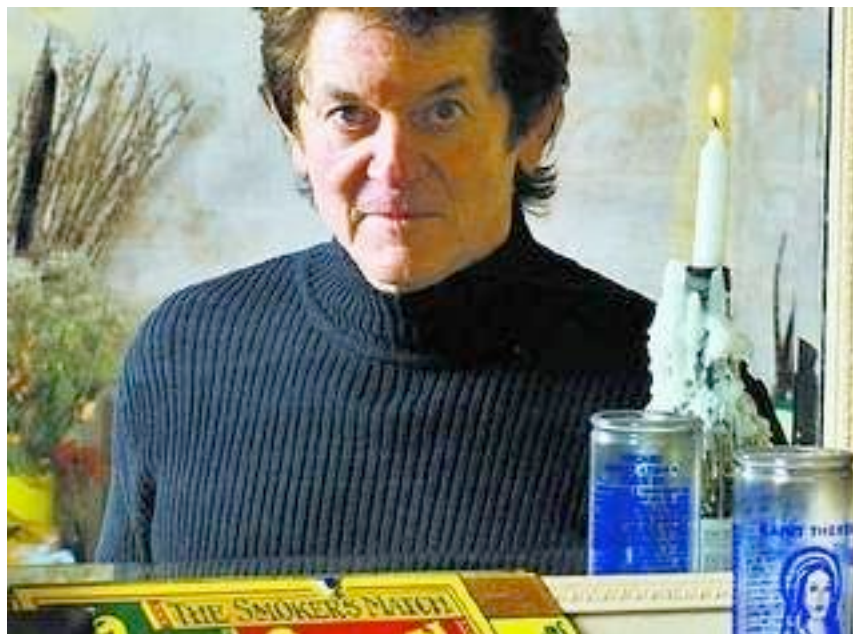


This week's music playlist

August 24, 2008

By: Martin Bandyke



Rodney Crowell is too often lumped into the country category, but his music has intelligence and complexity that is way beyond the Garths and Kennys of that particular universe. "Sex & Gasoline" (**** out of four stars, out Sept. 2 on Yep Roc) is the latest command performance from the Texas native who first gained acclaim in the '70s as a songwriter and guitarist for Emmylou Harris.

Besides writing the indelible "Till I Gain Control Again" and "Ain't Livin' Long Like This" for Harris, Crowell has also had his songs covered by everyone from Bob Seger ("Shame on the Moon") to the Oak Ridge Boys ("Leavin' Louisiana in the Broad Daylight"). Crowell's own solo career hit a peak in 1988 with the album "Diamonds & Dirt," which produced five No. 1 country singles, including "It's Such a Small World," a duet with Rosanne Cash, to whom he was married at the time.

The most audacious moment on Crowell's latest is "The Rise and Fall of Intelligent Design," beginning with the startling opening line, "If I could have just one wish, maybe for an hour/ I'd want to be a woman and feel that phantom power." Crowell goes on to imagine what it would be like to be the first woman president, turns around to ruminate about the male gender, takes a swipe at creationists, then ponders the possibilities for a safe and peaceful world. He effortlessly covers a lot of territory and leaves you pleasantly dizzy with his literate yet earthy style.

Mixing compassion and caustic social commentary, the title song on "Sex and Gasoline" criticizes the premium that society places upon women's appearances and age: "You're pushing 30/Why you old hag/Here's something dirty for your shoppin' bag/You spend the money/Here's the deal/We'll do our best to mend your sex appeal."

Produced with great empathy and clarity by Joe Henry, who does a duet with Crowell on the emotional "I've Done Everything I Can," "Sex & Gasoline" also contains the gorgeous declaration of love "The Night's Just Right" and a wry look at growing older, "Closer to Heaven." Closer to perfection than most anything you've heard this year, the latest statement from the 58-year old Crowell is essential listening.

(The Rodney Crowell Acoustic Trio plays at the Ark in Ann Arbor on Oct. 6.)