

Rodney Crowell gives his best on 'Tarpaper Sky'

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
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Coming off a recent Grammy win with long-time friend and performing partner Emmylou Harris, Rodney Crowell kicked off his "Tarpaper Sky" tour Saturday night at Music City Texas in Linden, playing to a packed and appreciative house.

The record drops April 15, but Crowell shared several of the new tunes during the set list. He opened with "The Long Journey Home," a hard driving anthem to young dreams. With a solid back beat, this is vintage Crowell – the young man from the wrong side of the tracks in Houston, trying to make a living playing gigs throughout East Texas.

"Fever on the Bayou" gives a nod to the Canjun influence in Southeast Texas. You can almost smell the crawfish boil and the tune sure makes you want to dance across the floor with your sweetheart.

"Frankie, Please" is just flat out, hard core rocking country:

*You tore through my life
like a tornado looking
for a trailer park*

The whole joint was dancing in their chairs.

Crowell, 63, brought Steuart Smith along for this leg of the tour. Smith, who also plays guitar for The Eagles, first recorded with Crowell in 1988 on "Diamonds and Dirt." Playing upright bass was Michael Rinne, with Keio Stroud on drums.

Smith joined Crowell and Harris for "Yellow Moon," named Best Americana Album at the recent Grammy Awards.

"Steuart's a record producer's dream because he plays in such a way that supports the interior part of the melody and the arrangement of the song," Crowell said during a News-Telegram interview last August.

Smith's guitar work certainly added the right touch to the show. Crowell let him run wild during several numbers and the knowledgeable crowd rewarded him with extended applause.

"Somebody's Shadow" has a 1950s feel, and Smith made the most of the break. Add a honky tonk piano and you've got a song that people will be dancing to for a long, long time.

Crowell slows it down a bit with "Grandma Loved That Old Man," giving it a cha-cha beat with tropical overtones. The combination is a little strange, but it was one of the highlights of Saturday's show and it provides a pleasing sentimental surprise. Smith's solo here is just plain dreamy.

The love story at the heart of the tune shows why Crowell is one of the country's best

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songwriters. There's a lot to think about in his lyrics.

"Somebody's Shadow" is an R&B anthem to love gone bad and has a lot of Memphis in it.

Has anybody see her now?

Pray, tell me what you hear.

I just can't get over how she shed me like a tear.

"I Wouldn't Be Me Without You" tells of true, tested love set in 3/4-time.

In his 2011 memoir, "Chinaberry Sidewalks," Crowell revealed the close relationship he shared with his mother. In "Jesus Talk to Mama," he asks the Lord to tell his mother that he's doing OK, that he "beat the devil to draw" and that his "wanderin' days are through."

Perhaps the most intimate moment on the record comes from the ballad "God, I'm Missing You."

I heard a siren

And you came to mind

You were the pretty part of us

I once left behind.

The equation's remainder

The last standing sign

God, I'm missing you.

...

There's a sanded down moon

in a tarpaper sky

God, I'm missing you.

He held our hearts in his hand by the end of this one.

The album closes out with "Flyboy and the Kid" and "Beautiful World," both solid songs with lovely arrangements written with the benefit of hindsight and wisdom.

Crowell and friends played for two hours Saturday night, striking a satisfying balance between old and new songs.

"Tarpaper Sky" gives the listener everything ... a little soul, a little gospel, country and a lot of rock 'n' roll.

Crowell has few peers in the music business. He stands with Guy, Hank and Townes as one of the best there ever was.

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Crowell closed Saturday's show with "Pancho and Lefty," a tribute to his friend Townes Van Zandt, who would have been 70 on Friday. He asked the audience to take the chorus, so we all got to join in honoring Townes. It was perfection.

To hear Rodney Crowell do an acoustic version of "God, I'm Missing You," click [here](#) .