

**A Conversation with Ketch Secor of Old Crow Medicine Show
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com, 4/2004)**

The annual John Lennon/Imagine No Handguns Benefit was particularly good in Nashville this year. There were a half dozen standout performances among the many performers, but the most arresting and memorable for me was the string band rebels of town, The Old Crow Medicine Show, rocking the house with sinewy versions of “Crippled Inside” and “Bungalow Bill.”

Before rock and roll, before bluegrass, string bands and jug bands were two of the main mediums for people, especially in more rural areas, to get together and dance, drink, and let off some steam. Like a lot of blues music was rediscovered, string bands and related music were researched, revitalized, and re-popularized by groups like the New Lost City Ramblers and many others in and around the folk music revolution of the 1960s.

Old Time or old timey music has existed side by side with bluegrass since the folk boom—never as big, but it certainly enjoys a wide enough following to have its own festivals and devoted crowds of listeners and players, legions of them. As suburban PA youngsters, certainly my crowd of friends was collecting old country blues as well as string band music and bluegrass. It was all part of finding out where the music we liked, like the Byrds and the Buffalo Springfield and Bob Dylan, came from.

Bluegrass got an incredible bump from the *O Brother* phenomenon, but Old Time and String Band music received one as well. (First of all, lots of folks out there wouldn't know how to tell one from the other, if they both had a banjo involved. And it's really not important—if it's good, it's good, right?) But, like Nickel Creek or Allison Krauss and Union Station, it really needed one good looking great sounding group to step up to the mic and kick everybody's ass. And here they are. The Old Crow Medicine Show.

Along with fiddler and vocalist Ketch Secor, OCMS is made up of Morgan Jahnig on upright bass, Kevin Hayes on guit-jo (a six string hybrid of guitar and banjo), Willie Watson on guitar and excellent vocals, and Critter Fuqua singing and playing banjo, guitar, and bottleneck guitar.

They're more than a string band, because they're singing and playing original songs, not just playing hillbilly instrumental standards for people to square dance to or something. It's like the name says, it's a show, there's a snake oil factor and a hip twist to the elixir.

I was very taken with their fiddler Ketch Secor, who's extremely knowledgeable and passionate about the music that OCMS is playing, and he speaks about it very eloquently with no trace of purist diatribe. I never thought I'd see a string band with a hot label, hip management, and a big time booking agency like Monterey, about to take off and make a real living. In the age of *Nashville Star*, *American Idol*, and “reality” TV, it's very encouraging.

With great pleasure, we introduce you now to Ketch Secor of the Old Crow Medicine Show.

Puremusic: Hey, Ketch, this is Frank Goodman at Puremusic. How you doing, man?

Ketch Secor: Hi, Frank. Pretty good, how about yourself?

PM: Very good. Where do I find you today?

KS: You find me in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, at the eighth inning of a game between the Baltimore Orioles and the Montreal Expos.

PM: Excellent. So it's the top or the bottom of the eighth?

KS: It's the top of the eighth, the sides have just been retired. It's three-nothing Expos. The Expos are playing pretty well. I'm impressed.

PM: [laughs] Are you pulling for the Orioles or the Expos?

KS: Well, I'm in an Orioles stadium.

PM: Right.

KS: I mean, Ft. Lauderdale is where they play, so I'm trying to keep my spirits up for the hometown crowd, but I'm cheering for the Expos, because I think they're such a bunch of losers that I really want to see them do well.

PM: [laughs] Yeah. So you're just back from South By Southwest [a huge musical event throughout the many musical venues of Austin, with bands from all over the country vying for the attention of labels, bookers, sponsors, managers, and fans].

KS: That's right.

PM: I've never been. What's that like?

KS: Well, it's pretty crazy. It's lots of people from foreign countries.

PM: [laughs]

KS: And that was sort of a surprise to me, because I think even more so it's become an international affair.

PM: Really? That I didn't know.

KS: But it's a lot of music industry types, so it ends up coming off like one of those corporate retreat kind of deals, everybody's got name tags. And it's like you're always on the job, you know.

PM: And everybody's drinking to beat the band, or what?

KS: Well, there's a lot of people boozing it up, a lot of people yucking it up, and people looking to get jobs, and trying to remember the guy you walked into the bathroom with, who your seat mate was on the shuttle, and stuff like that.

PM: Right. How many shows you guys play down there?

KS: I think we played four.

PM: And were you kicking ass everywhere you went or—

KS: Well, last year we were really kicking ass at South By Southwest, and it directly resulted in us being signed to Nettwerk. That all took place there. So last year was really our year. And this year at South By Southwest was not quite so grand.

PM: And why, would you say?

KS: Because all the cool stuff already happened to us.

PM: Right, you already had Nettwerk behind you.

KS: And South By Southwest seems to be all about getting behind young artists. And I feel like we're already on our way, and I think it was understood. "Well, the Crows have a record out. They've got a booking agent. They've got a label. They got management, all that other stuff."

PM: "Don't worry about them, they're fine."

KS: Exactly. And everyone's really looking for the young pups who don't have all that stuff yet.

PM: And did you see any young pups who looked like tomorrow's candidates?

KS: Open Road. It's a bluegrass band from Colorado, finest bluegrass band I've seen under twenty-five.

PM: Really?

KS: Yeah, in my life.

PM: Oh, wow. Okay, we're getting right on them. And as far as one could tell, didn't even have a label, is that right?

KS: They had some kind of interest. They were talking about who liked them and everything. But that's what all the guys talk about.

PM: Right. [Actually it turns out that their new release on Rounder Records hits the streets May 4th.]

KS: It's kind of a flavor of the month vibe.

PM: [laughs] So what about at night—would it be hell raising at night, or early to bed? Or what's the deal?

KS: Well, we raised some hell. We always raise a little. But we had just come off the road on a seven-day run with Gillian Welch and David Rawlings, so we were pretty whooped by the time we got to South By Southwest. Last year I think we really tied one on, but this year it was pretty mellow for the Old Crows.

PM: Speaking of Rawlings and Gillian, I really thought that was an amazing record you guys just made with him. [David Rawlings produced the new OCMS album.]

KS: Well, thank you.

PM: I mean, that's a fantastic disc. How far do you and the guys go back with David Rawlings?

KS: I guess the first time that I was ever made aware of them was when I was in high

school, when I saw them play in concert about ten years ago. I saw them open up for David Grisman and thought they really stole the show.

PM: And was that around here, or—

KS: It was up in New Hampshire. So that's when they made themselves known to me. And we made ourselves known to them on January the 12th of 2001, when we made our Grand Old Opry debut at the Ryman. They were listening to it on the radio. Like a lot of players in Nashville, if you're not working on a Saturday night, you're probably at home doing your laundry with your loved ones, listening to the Grand Old Opry.

PM: [laughs] Really?

KS: Yeah, that's what I do, and play cards.

PM: That's great stuff.

KS: So they heard us play our couple of tunes there, and that's when we registered with them as a band.

PM: So that show—what turned out to be a fated show at the Opry—how did you get that gig?

KS: Well, through a whole lot of other twists of fate, Marty Stuart got us that gig. And it all kind of started when we met Doc Watson on the street corner. That was sort of our big break.

PM: That's an amazing story—that his daughter saw you playing in front of a pharmacy in Boone or something?

KS: Right. That's right. That's how it went down.

PM: That's rock 'n' roll.

KS: Yeah. And a lot of things like that have happened. The way it happened, it's like bing, bing, bing. It all involved these players who took us under their wings. And it's kind of a classic approach to being in a country band in Nashville. Sometimes I think it sounds too made-for-TV to be real.

PM: [laughs] And some of those players involved were Doc himself, Marty Stuart, and then Gillian and David? What other musician buddies gave you a hand up along the way there?

KS: Definitely my friend Tom T. Hall.

PM: Really?

KS: Yeah. Tom came out to a bunch of our shows and was really supportive of us when we first got to Nashville.

PM: Wow. An unlikely group of people.

KS: Well, it might seem unlikely in the fact that none of the music is the same, and that the characters are very different, but the one thing they have in common is that all of those people have hearts full of country music. They're all about music. And whether it's country

music, or whatever it is, each one of those players is a real life musician. They're the kinds of players who are going to play all their lives and are going to be constantly contributing to the body of American music.

PM: Right to the grave.

KS: Yeah, yeah. And that's what I'm setting up here as well. That's what the Old Crows are hoping to do, whether this is as a band or as individuals, or however it falls.

PM: That's the kind of guys you are.

KS: Yeah, we want to be like that. We want to be like the mainstay.

PM: That's a beautiful thing. What kind of a producer was David on the disc? There are so many kinds. What was his role?

KS: Well, Dave just told us to play it again.

PM: [laughs]

KS: He didn't have a lot of fancy stuff in there. I mean, it was a very natural environment, both at Studio B and at Woodland.

PM: Have they changed Woodland around much? Gillian and David acquired it at some point, right?

KS: Right. They bought it about two years ago.

PM: Yeah.

KS: They recorded their album *Soul Journey* there, and that was the first album made at Woodland in probably 15 years. And then ours was the second.

PM: It's exciting. I mean, they really get into the historic rooms, B, and then Woodland. Michael Rhodes once said to me, "Oh, that's the best live room in Nashville. That's the one, Woodland."

KS: Yeah, it's very sweet.

PM: And as a producer, David wasn't, like, getting into the arrangements—was he big on mic placement? Who was engineering? I forget.

KS: The engineer was Matt Andrews. He tends to do a lot of his work over at the Sound Emporium for some big name acts. But he's a fantastic guy. He's from up in Coshocton, Ohio. And I'm a Buckeye myself. So we like to talk about Clinger and stuff like that together.

PM: [laughs] And they had incredible old microphones and shit like that going on?

KS: Yeah. Great old microphones. I guess one of the things that Dave did in the production sense is he created this thing that sort of looked like a swingset—we called it "the rig," and it refers to the microphones. We're a live band, and in our live set, you'll see us with a whole lot of microphones in front of us. Dave's microphone setup had all these great big booms and all these huge stands and racks. So it looked like we were squaring off against

some kind of like futurama machine, with all these angles and metal and steel poking out at you, with all these funny old mics and—

PM: And you just step up to the rig and let it rip.

KS: Yeah, that's how it went down. It's all live. There are a couple of things that we had to do a few overdubs on, but primarily the record is an entirely live record. And it was pretty much up to us to make the sound come alive. It came alive because we made it that way.

PM: The group just jumps like a son of gun, it's fantastic.

PM: Now, there are two earlier OCMS records, gone or going out of print, right?

KS: Yeah. There are actually three records that came before *Old Crow Medicine Show*.

PM: Right, with the live record.

KS: Yeah.

PM: Now, are those earlier records going to disappear, or is somebody going to revive them? Do we know?

KS: Oh, they'll be back around. I'm not sure who's going to do it. It hasn't been a high priority lately, but it's going to be one soon. We sold those records in high numbers for—well, we've been in this 6 years now, so we've sold a lot of those early records. And we'll make them available again in some form or another. We might go back and remaster them, because they were kind of scratchy. We never used a producer before David Rawlings. We did everything on our own, so they have a homespun quality to them that we might improve upon in the remastering.

PM: Right. That's a hot label you got now, Nettwerk. That's a really good outfit. I mean, they certainly did a fine job with the Be Good Tanyas, and Ron Sexsmith's last record or two. And that's got to be a real kick in the pants to the OCMS, right?

KS: It's really exciting to have a cutting edge bunch of young thinkers, Americans and Canadians and Europeans, all on board with the report. Look to Nettwerk to put out some interesting music in the coming years. I think they're one of the real great underdogs.

PM: And that's what the conglomerate is, Americans, Canadians, and Euros? It's obviously a German-type spelling of that word.

KS: Yeah, there's an office over in Munich. They do a lot of European dance music. And the label is based in Vancouver.

PM: Although there are some earlier records, there must be a certain feeling that this OCMS record, called *Old Crow Medicine Show* like a first CD might be called, is something like a first real record with a famous producer and a hot opening tour slot coming up, right?

KS: Yes. To us, it's definitely like a first time, even though we've done it a few times before. We've never done it with this kind of support behind us, and we've never done it with such a high quality record that really says something and is consistent through and through. So it's very much a first for us.

PM: And the package is really good. I mean, the cats look very hip—young and studly, and they got the punk vibe going on with the string band sound. It was just a top shelf package. It made you guys look as cool as you are.

KS: Well, thanks, man. That's nice to hear. We did a lot of that design ourselves, so it's got a lot of our own voices in it.

PM: Beautiful. I thought you guys were really amazing at that John Lennon/Imagine No Handguns benefit recently.

KS: Oh, yeah, with Dave and Gil on board.

PM: That was really good. You did that incredible version of "Crippled Inside."

KS: I think that's one of the great anti-war songs of our time.

PM: Wow. Was that a one off, or is that going to become part of the repertoire at any point?

KS: Actually, we recorded that over at Woodland, but it didn't make the grade. We had a couple of songs about the war—it seemed like a good time to sing out against war.

PM: I heard that.

KS: So we had a couple of them, but neither of them ended up being within the body of this record. But you might see some of them on records to come.

PM: Good, because you guys did a bang up version of that. And "Tell It To Me," that's a good version of the many versions of the cocaine blues and jug songs out there. Where did you guys run into that version?

KS: Well, that comes from a group called The Grant Brothers, who recorded that in a furniture store in Johnson City in 1926.

PM: Wow! And is that reissued somewhere? Can that be found?

KS: It can be found, because I found it when I was seventeen. But for the life of me, I can't remember what the record was called. All I know is that it's The Grant Brothers.

PM: That's a good lead. I'm a lot older than you, but it was about when I was seventeen through my early twenties that I was listening to a lot of jug band music and string band music. So yeah, we're probably birds of a feather at different times, but not at different times of our lives.

KS: Well, it seems like you really need to listen to that kind of music to gain an understanding of what the whole picture is. It's such a pivotal part of American music making, the sound that was created in the 1920s, before the radios, before bluegrass, before record sales were nearly as important—back in the old days when people thought that maybe they shouldn't make records, like making records was a way that other bands would steal their live shows. That's the way a lot of guys felt about it back then. They were very mistrusting of the A & R thing.

PM: Wow, that angle I've never really heard—"Maybe we shouldn't make records. They'll steal our sound."

KS: Oh yeah. I've heard a lot of the guys talk about that. Like Gus Cannon said that. And I know Will Shade talked about that. A lot of these Memphis cats. Because the music was so competitive. And if suddenly somebody anywhere in the country could play your licks, well that's just dangerous. I mean, is that worth however many pennies you'd make on a record, or a free trip to Richmond, Indiana?

PM: That's wild.

I know so tragically little about the band, and the bio is so understated. Maybe you'd allow me a few historical-type questions.

KS: Sure. Shoot.

PM: I know that the members are from different places. How did you guys meet up and start rolling?

KS: Well, the band probably came together first when Ketch and Critter were in the seventh grade together. That's when the two of us met and first began playing music together.

PM: And that was where?

KS: That was in Harrisonburg, Virginia, which is in the Shenandoah Valley.

PM: Sure, I've been to Harrisonburg.

KS: And then we flash forward about eight years to New York State, where I happened to be, trying to get in good with a gal, and I brought my friend Critter up with me. We met up with some players up in New York, namely Willie Watson. And then we dragged in a guy that I'd met on the streets of Bar Harbor Maine, he was up there raking blueberries, and I was on the street in front of a jewelry store playing the banjo, and that was Kevin Hayes. And we brought him down from Haverhill, Massachusetts, where he's from. And we assembled a whole bunch of these players all around Ithaca, New York, where there is a very lively old-time music scene.

PM: Right.

KS: And that's when we started our first tour.

PM: Was Kevin Hayes playing five-string when you first met him?

KS: No. Kevin was playing the guitar. And then about three years into the band, about halfway through up to this point, he switched over to the guit-jo. And at this point, Kevin is probably, in my estimation, the only professional guit-jo player in America. And I only say that because I've never met another pro guit-jo player. I've met people who use it in their live shows, but nobody who plays it solely.

PM: Yeah. And I'm all about finding out more about the guit-jo. What can you tell me? I mean, I'm trying to determine, as I listen to the record, "Well, that's the five-string, that's the guit-jo." I can't quite get a handle on how he plays that thing, and what's it all about?

KS: Well, the guit-jo is a very percussive instrument, and it's got the kind of hollowness that the banjo has, that kind of plunk that the banjo has, but it doesn't have a twangy thing. It's not really high end. It's like an empty, hollow, bass-y sound. If you need to identify it

on the record, once you hear it, once you identify it as the guit-jo, then you'll be able to determine where it is through the record. Because once you know what it sounds like, I mean, it only sounds like a guit-jo. You'll never have it confused with anything else.

PM: And is he playing it fingerstyle or is he playing with a plectrum?

KS: He's doing a little bit of both. Primarily he plays with a pick. He plays a 1931 Gibson banjo. It's the GB-100, the Guitar-Banjo 100 series. They used to be prominent in bands like the Hot Five and the Hot Seven of Louis Armstrong fame. There was also a guy named Papa Charlie Jackson who made records and was included on the Harry Smith Anthology, and he was a Mississippian guit-jo player.

PM: Wow. Well, yeah, I appreciate that, because I'm going to go get me some guit-jo records and look into that. That's a great sounding axe.

KS: Yeah. I think it's awesome. And it's a big part of our sound.

PM: Absolutely.

KS: Kevin's got this kind of loose rhythm that sometimes comes ahead and sometimes behind, and it just adds to the fullness. If it was a guitar, it wouldn't sound nearly as cool.

PM: Yeah, it would sound too regular.

KS: It's got lots of rakes and pulls. It's a trickster instrument.

PM: Right.

KS: He actually was able to play Sam McGee's old guit-jo, Sam McGee being—you know Sam, one of the early Opry performers.

PM: Sure.

KS: Kevin played Sam's guit-jo. It was about two years later a model than Kevin's. I think he had a '33. But Kevin found a guy down in Franklin who had Sam's guit-jo, and he was able to play it.

PM: Reminds me of the first day I ever got to Nashville, I ran into Marty Stuart at SIR. And someone introduced to him. He said, "You want to play Clarence White's guitar?" I said, "Yeah, sure." [laughs]

KS: [laughs] "Sure thing."

PM: So are there leader types, or type A personalities, in the band?

KS: Yeah, there's myself, and there's Willie, and Morgan, our bass player, we kind of divvy up the responsibility between the three of us.

PM: As democratic as bands have to be, there also have to be guys who come to the front and take care of different kinds of business.

KS: Yeah. I usually take care of the interviewers because I'm a talker.

PM: Oh yeah, you're really fluid and you're perfect for the job. Let's see, is there a guy in

the band who is always late or you have to go find him?

KS: No. I mean, there used to be those elements. But we cleaned up a little bit. We really had to. There's a lot of responsibility once you get all these people on board with you, and suddenly you're supporting everybody else's families. That's when you realize that you got to take your job seriously, so that's what we did.

PM: Are you guys living together at this point?

KS: No.

PM: No. Everybody's got their own digs. Families?

KS: Yeah. I'm married. But I'm the only married guy. But the other guys have got their own lives going on in Nashville. And who knows where we're going to end up. I don't think Nashville is going to be the home for the Old Crows forever. We've been here for about four years now. And when we first came to town, we moved into a house together, all of us, on Dickerson Road [a pretty wild hood, lots of hookers and cracktivity, and so forth].

PM: Wild.

KS: We're just as happy as ever to get the hell out of that dump.

PM: No kidding! [laughs] When did you first get turned on to string band music, and did you ever play a different kind of music, or have you been playing this kind of music right from the get?

KS: Well, the Old Crows have always played this kind of music. We never played something else. We were initially a string band that has evolved into something more than a string band, writing our own songs and covering some tunes, et cetera. But for the individual members, everybody started with something other than traditional music. Myself, I started with just learning rudimentary chords so that I could play rock songs. I really got sold early on in my life on folk revival music. The first song I ever learned to play was a Tom Paxton song.

PM: "The Last Thing on My Mind," or which one?

KS: It was "Ramblin' Boy."

PM: That's a real big favorite in my family. We all played that.

KS: Oh, yeah?

PM: So it's mind blowing to hear you say that.

KS: Yeah.

PM: And "I Can't Help But Wonder Where I'm Bound," too, that one.

KS: Yeah, that's a great one.

PM: Small world.

KS: Well, I had this *Newport Broadside* record that I was really, really crazy about. It was

1963 at the Newport Folk Festival. And I learned a lot of licks off of that. And I was singing “You Playboys and Playgirls,” and a bunch of Bob Dylan tunes pretty soon thereafter. So I got to give props to Bob. I think that Bob is really the main one, the integral force in making me want to play jug band music and making me want to go back to the source.

PM: Wow.

KS: Because Bob is such a literate guy, and his songs so easily throw you back in time.

PM: Yep.

KS: All these characters he conjures up. Even just the general words he chooses, they’re coming from somewhere else, they’re coming from before. And you can go back there easily with just a library card, you can figure out who played what and how it all went down. And I’m a history man.

PM: What about the other guys? What were they playing before they came to traditional music?

KS: Well, Critter was something of an electric guitar prodigy. He was playing all of these tablature licks right out of those rock ‘n’ roll magazines.

PM: Arlen Roth and all those guys, right?

KS: He was really hitting like Diamond Darrell from Pantera.

PM: Dime Bag! [laughs]

KS: Yeah, man. And he really liked like Queensryche, and all that just kind of bullshit metal.

PM: [laughs] Oh, that’s hilarious.

KS: He learned like all of those licks, like Yngwie Malmstein and like David Mustaine [of Megadeath fame].

PM: Oh, my Lord!

KS: So that was Critter.

And Willie was in this young folksy kind of jam element acoustic band that was really popular in the southern tier region of New York State where we grew up. So he was playing shows statewide by the time he was sixteen, playing the guitar, and being the lead vocalist in this group that had some congas and some clawhammer banjo and some real folk element to it.

PM: What was their name?

KS: They were called The Funnest Game.

PM: Cool. And how about Morgan?

KS: Morgan, he was born and raised up in Chattanooga. And he grew up playing brass in

school. Then he hit the rockabilly scene pretty hard right out of high school and moved to New York and played rockabilly bass.

PM: Wow.

KS: We met Morgan on the street corner in Nashville. He was just walking by with his old man while we were busking there. And then we lost our bass player, Benny—he had a baby, and couldn't swing it down south.

So the street corner brought a lot of players to us. It brought both Morgan and Kevin, and it really helped to hone the skills that the Old Crows developed through the years of how to hold an audience. We learned a lot on the street corners. We learned a lot from street performers, and from being that kind of performer ourselves. That's very much a part of what we're doing.

PM: Is the range of music that you guys are listening to now very wide or very focused?

KS: It's very wide. I mean, it really isn't contained by any terms or genres, because when you love music or when you play music professionally, it's almost a responsibility you have to know as much as you possibly can—whether it's about the history of country music, which is something I really love, or the history of jazz music, which is something that Kevin really loves. So whatever it is—I mean, I've got every Bob Dylan record. I think there are 61 of them.

PM: Holy geez.

KS: I'd like to have every Willie Nelson. I think there are 123 of them.

PM: [laughs]

KS: And I like Neil Young a lot. When you love music, these guys, they're not going to let you down. They're going to keep putting out great stuff, and they've continued to. So my collection keeps growing with every year. [Turning away slightly, he says "I'll meet you up there, Dad."]

Expos win.

PM: Expos win. [laughs]

Are there any religious or spiritual guys in the band?

KS: There's a spiritual nature to what's going on, but it's not summed up by any divination. But when you play the music—when you play the soundtrack of what came before, from this kind of older idyllic time, you can't help but feel—I mean, I'm singing these songs that have come out of somebody's mouth already, and I'm learning it from these old dead men, so there are a lot of elements of the supernatural involved as well.

PM: Well, that's a beautiful note to wind up on. I really think you're a fascinating cat.

KS: Thank you.

PM: And I love the music of OCMS. I think you guys doing something really important.

KS: Well, that's what we're going to keep on doing, man. I'm glad that you see it that way. And it's been a pleasure talking to you. Thanks a lot.