



OLD 97's
BLAME IT ON GRAVITY
BIOGRAPHY

Some bands blast out of the gate and never recapture their early energy. Other bands establish themselves as models of consistency. Still other bands take a while to find themselves. And then there are bands like the Old 97s, who blast out of the gate, establish themselves as models of consistency, take a while to find themselves, and then, fifteen years in, deliver a glorious record that sums up everything about them that fans have always loved. With *Blame It On Gravity*, the seventh Old 97's record and the second for New West, the band has made its definitive statement. "It's really exciting," says Rhett Miller, the band's lead singer and songwriter. "I read an interview with Randy Newman where he said that if your work is as good at 50 as it was at 20, you've won the battle. We're nowhere near fifty, but I feel like this collection of songs is the best we've ever done. And I LOVED our earlier albums."

From the opening notes of the first song, "The Fool," *Blame It On Gravity* is an archetypal Old 97's record, only more so. Back in 2004, the band released *Drag It Up*, which was filled with more personal and contemplative songs; the music adjusted accordingly. At other points throughout the band's career, it has tilted toward power pop (*Fight Songs*, from 1999) and the sounds of the British Invasion (*Satellite Rides*, from 2001). *Blame it on Gravity* finds the band turning up the amps and returning to the satisfying crunch of its early records. There are triumphant windmilling riffs, squalls of feedback, and upward spirals of guitar noise -- and that's just in "The Fool." "Bands go through a phase where they age, as people," Miller says. "During *Drag It Up*, all of us had gotten older and started families. That record was full of songs about mortality and aging. This record is more like a second childhood. More guitars, and they're loud."

Still, second childhoods are wiser than first childhoods and however loud it is, *Blame It On Gravity* reflects a renewed focus in Miller's songwriting. "Around the time of *Drag It Up*, I was definitely distracted, both by the natural ebb and flow of the band also by my solo career. When my second solo record, *The Believer*, came out, it ran into some problems, and I spent about a year licking my wounds. When I did decide to recommit to writing songs, it was with a different attitude. I found that I cared much more about making the songs perfect, and much less about what happens to them after they're written and recorded. I mean, it's always been out of my hands, but with the music industry the way it is now, it's SO out of my hands."

Songs like the chiming, wistful "My 2 Feet" and the jauntily miserable "I Will Remain" demonstrate that Miller's rededication has paid dividends. And the shimmering, beautifully sung "No Baby I" has more good writing in it than most careers--including the line that gives the record its title. Miller's trademarks as a songwriter are all still in place--his clever wordplay and gut-wrenching emotional honesty, for starters--but they're accompanied by a more mature (which isn't to say more complacent) worldview. Above all else, Miller isn't afraid to stare directly into the heart of the matter, even if it's breaking.

On "The Easy Way," which rollicks forward courtesy of one of the record's many indelible melodies, Miller sings, "The easy way gets harder all the time." That wasn't the case when it came time for the band to make *Blame it On Gravity*. In the past, recording sessions have taken place in Los Angeles, New Orleans or New York. This time, the four members of the band decided to make the record in Dallas, where the band started fifteen years ago. *Blame It on Gravity* came together during a three-month recording session that doubled as a homecoming. "We recorded it in Dallas, in the same Lower Greenville neighborhood where our band formed," Miller says. "Salim Nourallah's studio was a block away from the house that Murry Hammond, our bassist, and I rented after Murry talked me into giving up my scholarship at Sarah Lawrence to pursue the rock and roll dream-- much to my parents' chagrin." Two of the 97's, guitarist Ken Bethea and drummer Philip Peeples, still live in Dallas. But two have left for the coasts. Miller now makes his home in New York's Hudson Valley, and Hammond lives in Los Angeles. "It's funny, because he's the biggest Southern boy of any of us," Miller says. "But he fell in love with a woman named Grey DeLisle, who is a wonderful singer and voiceover artist. They have a one-year-old son named Tex. It's probably best that he's in California. You can't name a kid Tex if you live in Texas."

From the beginning, Nourallah felt that the record was a special case. "Going into this record, the band's back catalog loomed large in my mind," he says. "I wanted to make a record that their fans, and people who have been with them since the beginning, could really be excited about." Sometimes, this meant replicating the band's live sound; other times, it meant something entirely different. "There's a song called 'I Will Remain' on the record. It's a scruffy love song with a kind of Replacements feel. At first, we were trying to do a normal modern stereo mix, with the drums right up the middle, but there was something that wasn't working. I had a whim to try a *Rubber Soul* mix, where you throw the drums on one channel with the bass and separate the vocal and guitar. Within ten minutes of trying this, we were really excited. It was clear that this was the way to go."

The album ends with "The One," which is not another love song but rather a breakneck tour through the band's early days, when the idea of being paid (well) to do what you love seemed like highway robbery:

Throw the money in the van
It all worked out just like we planned
Now the good times have begun
That's not a fire it's just the sun
It's like the old man said
Take the money and run
What's the rush?
Let's take The One

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