



Rodney Crowell
The Chicago Sessions

Take a look at the cover of Rodney Crowell's brilliant new album, *The Chicago Sessions*, and you might recognize a familiar callback to the legendary songwriter's 1978 debut.

"In a lot of ways, this album feels like that very first record to me," Crowell reflects. "When my daughter Chelsea suggested we lay the artwork out similarly, the connection made perfect sense. There's something very simple, very innocent about it. It's just me and the band in a room together, loose and live and having fun."

Produced by Wilco's Jeff Tweedy, *The Chicago Sessions* is indeed a throwback to Crowell's early days of making records, but it's no nostalgia trip. The songs are vital and timely, touching on everything from love and mortality to race and religion, and the performances are nothing short of intoxicating, fueled by raw guitars, honky-tonk piano, and tight, punchy drums. Tweedy wields a light touch as a producer, his influence subtle yet unmistakable, and engineer Tom Schick's mixes are dynamic and alive, alternately lush and spacious in all the right places with a spotlight fixed firmly on Crowell's warm, weathered vocals throughout. Put it all together and you've got a masterful, cross-generational collaboration that manages to feel both fresh and familiar all at once, an incisive, engaging collection that balances careful craftsmanship with joyful liberation at every turn.

"I've produced quite a few of my own records over the years," Crowell explains, "but I think I'm a better performer when someone else is wearing that hat. I feel so much more relaxed and present when all I need to do is play and sing, and Jeff's studio was like a playground for us to let go and lose ourselves in the songs."

For Crowell, it's always been about the songs. Born and raised in Texas, the two-time GRAMMY Award-winner moved to Nashville in the early 1970s, coming to prominence first as a writer before establishing himself as a critically acclaimed solo artist in his own right. With fifteen number one hits under his belt and tracks recorded by everyone from Emmylou Harris and Johnny Cash to Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson, it would be difficult to overstate Crowell's impact on country and roots music over the past five decades. In 2003, he was inducted into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame; in 2006 he received the Lifetime Achievement Award in Songwriting from the Americana Music

Association; in 2017, he was honored with ASCAP's prestigious Founder's Award; and in 2019, he was presented with the Academy of Country Music's Poet's Award. In addition to his prolific output as a singer, songwriter, and producer, Crowell also found time to become a celebrated author, too, publishing his memoir, *Chinaberry Streets*, and a lyrical retrospective, *Word For Word*, to widespread praise. Along the way, *NPR* declared him the "literarily inclined elder statesman of the Americana scene," while *Rolling Stone* hailed him as a "country music trailblazer," and the *New York Times* proclaimed that his songwriting "gets better and sharper with age."

For all the remarkable highlights in his storied career, Crowell still found one item that remained conspicuously unchecked on his bucket list in recent years.

"I'd always wanted to make a record in Chicago," he says. "I had these romantic, mystical notions in my head about it because of all the incredible albums that came out of the city, but I'd never actually gotten to record there myself."

It seemed like fate, then, when the universe connected him with Tweedy.

"I was driving home late one night when Jeff's song 'I Know What It's Like' came on the radio, and it just floored me," Crowell recalls. "We ended up both playing on the Cayamo Cruise a few months later, and when I approached him to share how much that song really stuck with me, he suggested I come to The Loft in Chicago sometime and record."

Tweedy, it turned out, had been a Crowell fan ever since seeing his performances in the film *Heartworn Highways*.

"The way that Rodney writes is deeply connected to a classic era of country songwriting that I've always loved," Tweedy explains. "In my estimation, it's as close as I can get to working with Townes Van Zandt or Felice and Boudleaux Bryant, people who crafted songs with a very specific sensibility. And I like being near that."

Working out of his home studio in Nashville, Crowell began compiling a collection of rough demos and voice memos to share with Tweedy for consideration. Pandemic lockdowns meant that Crowell had to keep things simple and stripped-down, playing all of the instruments himself and sometimes even just banging on his refrigerator for percussion. When it came time to actually record, Crowell brought three players with him to Chicago—guitarist Jedd Hughes, pianist Catherine Marx, and bassist Zachariah Hickman—while enlisting Windy City natives John Perrine and Spencer Tweedy (Jeff's son) to split drumming duties.

“The band didn’t even get to hear the demos before we started recording,” Crowell recalls. “We all knew each other so well—and the drummers both fit in so naturally—that I’d just start playing the songs and we’d work them out on the fly.”

That spontaneity and spirit of discovery is clear from the start on *The Chicago Sessions*, which opens with the buoyant “Lucky.” Driven by a propulsive, Levon-like groove from the younger Tweedy along with some dazzling piano work from Marx, the track embodies so much of what makes the album a joy to listen to: instantly memorable melodies, a blissfully dialed in band, and Crowell’s utterly infectious love of language. “Once upon a way back when / Misery was my best friend,” he sings with a sly grin. “Always running from a misspent youth / Cold and empty as a pay phone booth.” The sardonic “Somebody Loves You” dips its toe into the country blues as it skewers inequality and organized religion, while the rockabilly-tinged “Ever The Dark” reckons with an impending apocalypse, and the beautifully bittersweet “Loving You Is The Only Way To Fly” meditates on loneliness and regret.

While most of *The Chicago Sessions* consists of newly written material, Crowell revisits two tracks from the 1970s on the album. The first, the aching “You’re Supposed To Be Feeling Good,” is a Crowell original first recorded by Emmylou Harris on her 1977 *Luxury Liner* record (while Crowell long intended to record it himself, the stars didn’t align until a new arrangement fell into place with Tweedy on guitar). The second, Townes Van Zandt’s “No Place To Fall,” had always held a special place in Crowell’s heart.

“The first time I heard that song, Townes was sitting across the table from me at Guy and Susanna Clark’s house,” Crowell recalls. “He said, ‘Hey, I’ve got a new song for you,’ and it’s been imprinted on my psyche ever since. I wanted to record it as an homage to somebody that I learned a lot about songwriting from.”

Perhaps no track better encapsulates the spirit of the record, though, than the breezy “Everything At Once.” A co-write with Tweedy, the song walks a tightrope between hopefulness and cynicism as it playfully wrestles with overstimulation in an overcrowded world. “Everything at once / There’s too much and then some,” Crowell and Tweedy sing. “Everything at once / You lose and you live some.”

“It occurred to me that Jeff and I are both songwriters and we ought to write something together for this album,” Crowell explains. “We could have harmonized on it and gone down an Everly Brothers route, but ultimately we decided to just sing in unison and throw it out there like an all-skate. I love that we didn’t get too precious about it.”

In the end, that's what makes *The Chicago Sessions* such a delight. Rodney Crowell may be a seasoned veteran, but with an album this free, this transcendent, it feels like the first time all over again.