

CHATHAM COUNTY LINE AUTUMN

Our band is a lot like this place,” says Chatham County Line guitarist, lead singer and songwriter Dave Wilson. His eyes wander across the original hardwood lanes of the mid-century Raleigh bowling alley where he just finished rolling and drinking two rounds. Playing traditional string band instrumentation around a single microphone while clad in suits and ties visually projects a similar sepia-toned timelessness. “We create a product that you’re familiar with and you’ll enjoy going back to because you know what to expect. My dad ran a local hardware store years ago and I always felt like we shared that.”

Sure enough, like a small town store, there’s no dramatic tale or sexy hook to fuel the hype machine for *Autumn*, the seventh studio album since the Raleigh, NC-based Chatham County Line—Wilson, John Teer (mandolin/fiddle), Chandler Holt (banjo), and Greg Reading (bass, pedal steel, piano)—coalesced in the late 1990’s. Instead, the story behind the workmanlike group’s newest release—available September 2, 2016 via Yep Roc Records—is simple: A veteran ensemble at the top of its game sticking to its considerable strengths—poignant songwriting and inventive acoustic arrangements that draw upon a broad array of American roots influences, highlighted by trademark three- and four-part harmonies that shine throughout. But like the flat-screen televisions that now dot those bowling lanes, the quartet respects its history—from bluegrass inventor Bill Monroe to innovators like John Hartford—while remaining mindful of more modern influences, including its members’ backgrounds in rock bands.

“We were so obsessive about the way *Tightrope* sounded and making sure we got the songs right that this record was kind of a 180 from that,” Wilson explains, referring to the meticulous, multi-year process that birthed *Autumn*’s predecessor. “I think we were all exhausted from that process and wanted to just take the songs I had written and record them.” Thanks to the more casual approach, *Autumn* marries the comfortable maturity of 2014’s *Tightrope* with the welcome spontaneity of Chatham County Line’s earlier work. With some finishing touches done at Durham, NC’s Overdub Lane, two brief sessions—produced by Wilson at Kernersville, NC’s Fidelitorium—over the falls of 2014 and 2015 yielded not only the eleven tracks that comprise *Autumn*, but also a title for the album. Though the year between sessions wasn’t dedicated to consciously working on the record, it was perhaps the most productive period for the songs to take shape, according to Wilson. “It’s like leaving your desk and taking a walk: You have your best ideas when you’re not working on what you’re supposed to be working on.”

Nestled in the heart of the album, “Jackie Boy”—which Wilson describes as a “tribute to my old college friends and their dogs that have passed”—is a prime example of a song idea that was fully realized after a long gestation period. “That idea had been floating around in my head for a lot of years, but it was a really long, drawn-out song that no one would want to listen to,” he explains. “Eventually, I got fed up, came up with that guitar part and amalgamated the story.” Supported by a sparse, circular guitar pattern and accented by languid chops of Teer’s mandolin and mournful peals of Reading’s pedal steel, the wistful ballad’s tear-jerking lyrics are imminently relatable for anyone who has lost a beloved canine. Similarly, the rollicking album

finale “Show Me The Door” was built around a piano part that had been rolling around in Readling’s head for the better part of a decade before the band jammed over it during *Autumn*’s first studio session. The album track mostly features the words Wilson devised during that initial run-through, positioning the tune as a put-up-or-shut-up send-off.

Elsewhere, Wilson demonstrates his gift for transforming seemingly mundane source material into compelling vignettes. Take “Rock in the River,” built from a metaphor Wilson pulled from a stranger’s conversation: “I overheard this guy talking about the mistakes he’d made with this girl that he thought was ‘the one,’ but he’d heard that her mother said to her ‘don’t worry, he’s just another *rock in the river*.” Wilson showcases his storytelling skills by grafting that last line into a tale of lost love, while the band adds mandolin, banjo, and piano melodies all suggestive of cascading rivulets and winding waterways.

“Bon Ton Roulet,” on the other hand, was inspired by a bird. “I was listening to a woodpecker outside my basement and started singing this thing about a hangover—which sometimes occurs in my life—and the song just arrived,” Wilson remembers. Taps on an instrument body mimic the woodpecker “beating Morse code” which interrupts the narrator’s attempts to sleep off his sins of the night before, the slow-moving shuffle otherwise matching the lazy mood conjured by scenes from the morning after.

“Dave just keeps writing these great tunes and we keep trying to contribute what we can around that,” offers Holt humbly, considering Holt’s last-minute additions of the energetic instrumental “Bull City Strut” and the carefree, countrified anthem “If I Had My Way,” on which he sings lead. “That was an instrumental thing that we had been trying to make work for months, during which it went through all these different chord changes and bridges,” Holt says of the latter. “When we were in Kernersville, the lyrical idea kind of popped into my head, then Dave and I whittled it down, then I sang that first line and it all came from there.”

Putting family above the desires for fame and fortune, “If I Had My Way” suggests Holt’s cross-country move to join relatives in Colorado earlier this year. “It saved the band in some ways because it was getting so hard for me to be gone on tour,” Holt, who has a young son, explains. Although unusual for Chatham County Line—whose four members had lived within twenty miles of one another for their entire history as a band—it’s hardly unprecedented; Readling recalls scaling back on touring several years ago while building his house and preparing for the birth of his daughter. “We’ve always given each other room when we need to do other things in life.”

Fortunately for fans, Chatham County Line has no plans to cut back on its live engagements, from the elegant European concert halls to the large American folk festivals at which the quartet has become a fixture. On stage, the musical relationships fostered by its consistent line-up are apparent, through an unspoken chemistry that allows the freedom for improvisational flashes that seem as polished as the rest of its set. Those moments keep performances fresh as the band’s best-known songs become concert staples, despite a deep catalog that features dozens of stellar tunes. “The fans drive the setlist and the songs that we feel like we need to play every night,” Wilson states. “But this is never a position that I thought we would be in, that there would

be all these songs we wrote that people listen to and make babies to, so then they bring the baby to the show to hear that particular song.”

“The conundrum of this new record is what old songs do we take out of the set and which new ones do we put in,” Holt muses, agreeing with Wilson that it’s a good problem to have for a group in its second decade of making music on its own terms, happy to avoid the path of acts that have morphed into business juggernauts. “Music today has almost become about everything else besides the music, but for the four of us, it’s very much the opposite of that. We get to do what we want to do. What else is there?”