

## Masters of Bluegrass #15 J.D. Crowe

Banjo player J. D. Crowe began his professional career playing with Jimmy Martin's Sunny Mountain Boys in the 1960s. The recordings he made during his tenure with Martin have stood the test of time, especially "Crow (sic) on the Banjo." That a banjo player who sang baritone would become a bandleader may seem odd, but Crowe attracted some of the best players of the late 1960s and 1970s to his bands. "Bluegrass Holiday" by J. D. Crowe and the Kentucky Mountain Boys was recorded in 1968 and featured lead singer Red Allen, future bluegrass star Doyle Lawson on mandolin, bass player/fiddler Bobby Sloan and Crowe. They played an attractive blend of new and old songs that endeared them to traditional audiences. The excessive reverb on the recording makes it sound dated today.

In 1975, Crowe's New South surpassed the reputation of the Kentucky Mountain Boys and set a high watermark for bluegrass. The album was simply titled "J. D. Crowe and the New South." Consisting of Tony Rice on guitar and lead vocal, Ricky Skaggs on mandolin and tenor vocal, Crowe and Sloan on banjo and bass and Jerry Douglas on dobro, the band created a new clean, immaculate sound that would be imitated for decades. This album also benefited from high production values afforded the project. The work, due to its clean accurate recording, sounds contemporary today.

In 1977, future country music star Keith Whitley joined Crowe for three group albums. Whitley joined mandolin player Jimmy Gaudreau, Bobby Sloan and Crowe to create a band sound largely built around Whitley's vocals. The heavy commercial sound of drums and pedal steel may have put off traditional bluegrass fans but it presaged Whitley's commercial success.

Crowe's band continued after the departure of this line up but the group has never recaptured the magic of the 1975-79 bands. During the 1980s and the early 1990s, the 1975 band with one exception recorded the successful "Bluegrass Album Band" series of six albums. Doyle Lawson replaced Skaggs for this project, as Skaggs was busy with his commercial country music career during the 80s. This series essentially re-recorded the best of the 1<sup>st</sup> generation repertoires of Bill Monroe, Flatt and Scruggs, The Osborne Brothers and others. This band was a studio group with only one highly hyped live tour during its many years. The general reaction to the tour was mixed. Although the players were arguably the best bluegrass had to offer, they were not a band and the presentation suffered as a result.

Crowe's band has seen a recent resurgence and won the 2007 IBMA award for album of the year with "Lefty's Guitar."

### J. D. Crowe's Legacy

Crowe was for many, after Scruggs, the model of bluegrass banjo playing. At a time when every musician was recording an instrumental album, he never did. He felt Scruggs had already achieved the high mark in banjo playing and his efforts would only be redundant. As a bandleader, he attracted to his group the best young players of the time and created a model of excellence towards which even current players strive. The Bluegrass Album Band's recordings of the classic bluegrass songbook made searching out the original recordings unnecessary. These recordings are sonically superior to the originals and the playing was crisp and clear. Whitley's early death made his collaborations with Crowe sought after items.