

"Rock and roll's been very very good to me," Rhett Miller sings on "Longer Than You've Been Alive," an epic six-minute stream-of-consciousness meditation on his life in music. It's a rare moment of pulling back the curtain, on both the excesses and tedium of the world of a touring musician, and it's the perfect way to open the Old 97's new album, 'Most Messed Up.'

"I wrote that song very quickly and didn't rewrite one word of it," Miller explains. "It's sort of a thesis statement not just for this record, but for my life's work."

To say that rock and roll has been good to the Old 97's (guitarist/vocalist Miller, bassist/vocalist Murry Hammond, guitarist Ken Bethea, and drummer Philip Peeples) would be an understatement. The band emerged from Dallas twenty years ago at the forefront of a musical movement blending rootsy, country-influenced songwriting with punk rock energy and delivery. The New York Times has described their major label debut, 'Too Far To Care,' as "a cornerstone of the 'alternative country' movement...[that] leaned more toward the Clash than the Carter Family." They've released a slew of records since then, garnering praise from NPR and Billboard to SPIN and Rolling Stone, who hailed the band as "four Texans raised on the Beatles and Johnny Cash in equal measures, whose shiny melodies, and fatalistic character studies, do their forefathers proud." The band performed on television from Letterman to Austin City Limits and had their music appear in countless film and TV soundtracks (they appeared as themselves in the Vince Vaughn/Jennifer Aniston movie 'The Break Up'). Breaking Bad creator Vince Gilligan told The Hollywood Reporter that he put the band on a continuous loop on his iPod while writing the show's final scene.

'Most Messed Up' finds the Old 97's at their raucous, boozy best, all swagger and heart. Titles like "Wasted," "Intervention," "Wheels Off," "Let's Get Drunk And Get It On," and "Most Messed Up" hint at the kind of narrators Miller likes to inhabit, men who possess an appetite for indulgence and won't let a few bad decisions get in the way of a good story.

"A few people in my life said, 'You can't sing 'Let's get drunk and get it on,'" Miller remembers. "I said, 'What do you mean? I've been singing that sentiment for 20 years! I was just never so straightforward about it.'"

It was a trip to Music City that inspired Miller to throw away his inhibitions as songwriter and cut right to the heart of things.

"For me, this record really started in Nashville on a co-write session with John McElroy," he says. "I really admired his wheels off approach to songwriting, And I liked the idea he had for how he thought I should interact with my audience. He said, 'I think your fans want you to walk up to the mic and say fuck.' It was liberating." It reminded me that I don't have to be too serious or too sincere or heartfelt. I just

have to have fun and be honest. I felt like I kind of had free reign to go ahead and write these songs that were bawdier and more adult-themed."

The magic in Miller's songwriting lies in the depth that he lends his characters. Upon closer inspection, the hard partying and endless pursuit of a good time often reveals itself to be a band-aid covering up deeper wounds and emotional scars.

"There's a lot of darkness hidden in this record," he explains. "One of the big Old 97's tricks is when we write about something kind of dark and depressing, it works best when it's a fun sounding song. So it's not until the third or fourth listen that you realize the narrator of this song is a complete disaster."

If that description calls to mind The Replacements, it's no coincidence. Miller is a fan of the Minneapolis cult heroes, and now counts Tommy Stinson among his own friends and fans. Best known as bassist for the Mats and more recently Guns 'n' Roses, Stinson joined the Old 97's in the studio in Austin, Texas, to lay down electric guitar on ## tracks, elevating the sense of reckless musical abandon to new heights and lending the album an air of the Rolling Stones' double-guitar attack. It's a collaboration Miller never would have even imagined in 1994 when the band released their debut.

"We didn't think we'd last until the year 1997," Miller laughs. "We thought the name would get a little weird when it became 1997, but we decided none of our bands had ever lasted that long, so let's not even worry about it. But as it all started to unfold, we realized we could maybe make a living doing this, and we were all really conscious of wanting to be a career band. It was way more important to us to maintain a really high level of quality, at the expense, perhaps, of having hit singles or fitting in with the trends of the time, and I'm glad we did that."

Twenty years on, it's safe to say rock and roll has indeed been very, very good to the Old 97's.