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MUSIC

The Tracks of His Years

Singer/Songwriter Scott Miller Talks About Time Passing Between His Tour's Whistle Stops

By Geoffrey Himes

Most indie-rock bands travel by van, riding the same interstates with a stack of amps blocking the rear window. But since Jan. 20, Scott Miller and the Commonwealth have been touring as if they were a band from the 1940s, going from city to city by train. That's not the reason this quartet stands out in the crowded roots-rock field, but it's a symptom.

They began in New Orleans and continued through Hattiesburg, Jackson, Tuscaloosa, Birmingham, Atlanta, Greenville, Charlotte, and Charlottesville. Their train pulls into Washington's Union Station at 6 p.m. Feb. 5. Miller and his bandmates will spill out of the passenger car and play a short set right there in the station's lobby. After a show later that same night, the band re-boards the train in Washington, travels north to Philadelphia and Hoboken, and then returns south to Baltimore.

Miller calls it the "American Crescent Tour," named after his new single, "American Crescent," which was named after Amtrak's New Orleans-to-New York line. It's an eccentric approach, but it's emblematic of Miller's resolve to link his music to a less homogenous era of American culture. It all began last winter when the songwriter was stuck at his family home in rural Virginia with a broken nose. It "made me want to travel," he later wrote in his liner notes to his 2003 *Upside Downside* (Sugar Hill). "If I had been traveling, I would have wanted to be at home."

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The travel urge made him think of trains. Unlike most members of his generation--he's 35--Miller actually rode trains as a child. His grandfather was a doctor for the local railroad, so the whole family could ride for free. Miller's parents lived a long way from anywhere in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, and when his mom wanted to do some serious shopping she boarded the train in Staunton and rode the 88 miles to Roanoke.

"My mom stuck us on a train when I was 3 or 4 years old," he recalls. "We got on the L&N in Staunton and rode it through Knoxville to visit my grandparents in Frankfort. She said, 'I grew up riding trains, and these kids are going to know what it's like to ride a train.' You could hear the freight trains rolling past our farm, so I was fascinated to actually be on a train. It was so posh."

So last winter, cooped up at home and fueled by childhood memories, Miller resolved to write a train song. He rolled his chair over to his computer, Googled "train schedule," and the first thing that came up was "American Crescent" with a list of his favorite cities. Starting in New Orleans, he described a train trip northward, pushed along by a familiar syncopation.

"Who doesn't love that train shuffle beat?" he asks. "That rhythm of the rails is so primal. One of the first country songs to penetrate my thick skull was Roger Miller's 'Train of Life.' This was a long time ago, when I was writing obnoxious, timely songs. I was listening to this Roger Miller tape in my car, and that song knocked me back in my seat. So we're doing some train songs on this tour--that one and Hank Snow's 'Golden Rocket.'"

"American Crescent" could have been a simple exercise in nostalgia, but Scott Miller is too ambitious a songwriter for that. After all, he recorded two albums as co-leader of the V-Roys with Steve Earle producing, and Earle leaned on Miller never to settle for an easy line. The song becomes more than just an evocation of a past age of rail travel; it becomes a metaphor for the inexorable press of time. "I bought the cheapest ticket and I carried my clothes," Miller sings, "and the blood beneath my eyes from a broken nose/ When life goes wrong, this train goes on and on."

The song wound up on *Upside Downside*, and he played it twice in Baltimore last year--once in March as the solo opening act for Peter Case at the Mojo Lounge and again in June with the Commonwealth as the headliners at Mojo. Miller--in his faded jeans, tousled brown hair, and disconcertingly boyish face--nervously made fun of himself between songs, but once he jumped into a tune, his confidence grabbed hold. And whether he played it with acoustic guitar or electric, the train-shuffle riff reinforced the journey narrative and the theme of carrying on after the latest catastrophe.

It was during that June tour that Miller got the idea for the current one. "I was stuck between Baltimore and D.C. in traffic one day," he remembers. "And I said, 'Man there's got to be an easier way to do this.' Not only was it aggravating to be stuck in traffic, but it was also depressing to realize how everything looks the same. I hate this sprawl. They don't make more land, but they sure are making more people. Everything is losing its identity--the whole Eastern seaboard is becoming one indistinguishable BosWash. It's like the last verse of that song."

He's referring to the final verse of "American Crescent," where he sings, "It used to be pretty on the Eastern Shore/ now it's more New York down to Baltimore . . . Why does everything around me have to look the same?" That question has fueled much of Miller's songwriting and it inspired him to approach Amtrak about a different way of touring, a way that connected with an older, more idiosyncratic America.

Miller never lived on the Delmarva Peninsula, but he did study Russian literature at William and Mary College on the mouth of the James River in Virginia. Thus he has an appreciation for the Tidewater region's marshland beauty and its Chekhovian dilemma--it's a rural backwater that teens can't wait to get out of and adults can't wait to return home to. It's a lot like Miller's childhood town of Swoope, Va., an area of lush farms, short growing seasons, ghostly mountains, and, for a teenager, frightening isolation.

"We were into girls, basketball, Kiss, and stuff like that," he says of his classmates. "But it was a long-ass bus ride to my high school--there was no one around where I lived, no one to play with. As a result, I'm pretty socially awkward, but I was forced to develop an imagination. I painted for years, and then I started playing guitar at 15 when my brother came home from college with one. And my imagination made me interested in old stuff."

"Growing up in Virginia, looking back at the past is as natural as eating. It was being in the same house my great-grandfather lived in, walking the same path he did, using the same shovel he did. It was hearing my grandmother remember her grandfather who fought in the Civil War. You heard about extraordinary events and you realized these were people like me--that's my blood, those are my genes, and they did this. And that gave me some hope."

This push and pull between the present and the past, between beer-soaked frat bars and his grandmother's parlor, between tear-up-the-script rock 'n' roll and don't-forget-a-thing history gives Miller's songwriting its dramatic tension. He has written some great songs about trains, graves, and the Civil War, but his songs about drinking, screwing, and driving are just as good.

"I've never minded getting older because supposedly you get smarter," he says. "But I still like to get out and rock 'n' roll. There's something really fun about going into a dive bar in Tuscaloosa, cranking up the amps, and blowing their hair back. So I have one foot in church and the other in the honky-tonk. I'm drawn to family and history, but I can't deny how much fun the other half is. I'm torn between those things--I've yet to meld them. Some of these recent songs are attempts to sort it all out." **CPO**

Scott Miller and the Commonwealth play the Royal on Sunday, Feb. 8.