

# Not all the world's a stage to David Olney

## Role Model

by STEPHEN TRAGESER

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Interviewing David Olney is a unique experience. Artists we music journalists speak with often try to answer our (hopefully) thought-provoking questions in as few seconds as possible. Not that we blame them: How else are you going to get your press in 15 to 20 publications in a single day? Olney, however, takes his time. The distinguished songwriter weighs each word, giving you only the ones that count. Even discussing mundane details of his work, he's an engaging storyteller, revealing truths about a craft that he's been perfecting for more than 30 years.

When we touched on Olney's poetry recitations, which bring to life Romantics Coleridge and Shelley as well as 20th century poets like Dylan Thomas, we hit a bedrock principle tying Olney's songwriting and performance together. "It's like taking the poem and using it as a script," he explains. "The person reciting the poem suddenly becomes a part of it, instead of just being this disembodied voice saying those words."

Olney isn't theatrical in the flamboyant, highly physical way of a Freddie Mercury or a James Brown, but treating a performance as separate and distinct from everyday life is important to his work. Considering his roots, this presents a fascinating contradiction: Before he ever called himself a

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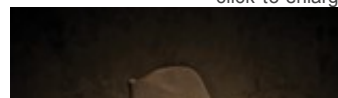


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Spotify is so 2013. BEATS, yo.

POSTED BY SETH GRAVES ON MAY 20, 2014

### Re: Live in the Morgue: Sturgill Simpson, 'Time After All'

Agreed.

POSTED BY D. PATRICK ON MAY 20, 2014

musician, the narrative aspect of folk music drew Olney in. A tradition including English and Irish ballads from Appalachia, interpreted by The Carter Family or Joan Baez, appears on the surface to be about stripping away pomp and circumstance. But Olney homed in specifically on how these stories use the "otherness" of an imaginary character to help organize chaos, and in the process created a catalog of writing and performance that earned praise from household names like Emmylou Harris and Townes Van Zandt.

"[Audiences] still have to like the songs," Olney says. "Either they get into it, or they go, 'That old man is crazy. Why is he doing that? Somebody make him stop!'"

Olney's craftsmanship seeps into all the nooks and crannies of his latest record. *Predicting the Past*, recorded in a warm and stripped-down presentation by local pan-American roots master Paul Burch, removes the layers of previous productions, throwing into relief techniques that reveal or reinforce the story with characteristic subtlety. Aural stagecraft is everywhere, from the vocal contours of hope and despair clashing in the Tejano-tinged "Look," to the one-note solo by Paul Burch on "We're All Innocent in Here," mirroring the eternal refrain from the film-noir inmates who claim they've been set up.

Released on the Swedish label Rootsy last spring, *Predicting* became available digitally in the U.S. on Dec. 10. The week before, Olney wrapped a Kickstarter campaign, raising \$26,000 in one month to release another record, nearing completion at producer Mark "Guido" Robinson's studio in Madison, Tenn. Coupled with his weekly YouTube song series "You Never Know," it's clear that industry veteran Olney has a better handle on using the Internet than many performers who came of age with it, but the same things that connect him with his audience make him uneasy with most social media.

"When I'm onstage, that's the most communication I'm going to do with anybody," says Olney. "These songs represent what my life is about, and I'm sending 'em out to people. We underestimate what *this* is." He gestures at me and back at himself. "Two people talking, brains picking up facial twitches, and all this stuff that goes on that we're not even aware of. That doesn't exist on Facebook. It's just you talking and hoping that someone's out there listening. That's very peculiar to me."

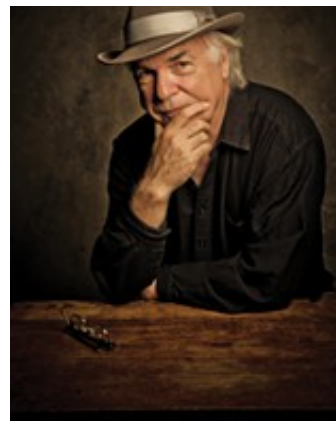
Olney's next onstage adventure takes music almost out of the equation altogether, as he joins The Nashville Shakespeare Festival's summer production of *As You Like It*. "Shakespeare still kicks ass after all these years," he says. "Before him, there wasn't anything like the detailed characters in his plays. They're like modern Hollywood scripts."

Olney couldn't have a more appropriate part if Shakespeare knew him personally: Lord Amiens loves to sing.

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Playing Dec. 27 at The 5 Spot

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Really good country singer

POSTED BY [PATRICIA SAUSEN](#) ON MAY 20, 2014

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nothing from Xanadu?!?

POSTED BY [KRH](#) ON MAY 20, 2014

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"...let it ring forevermore!"

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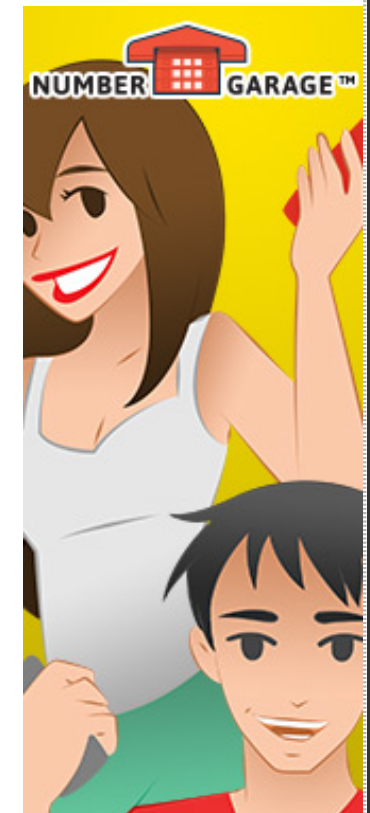
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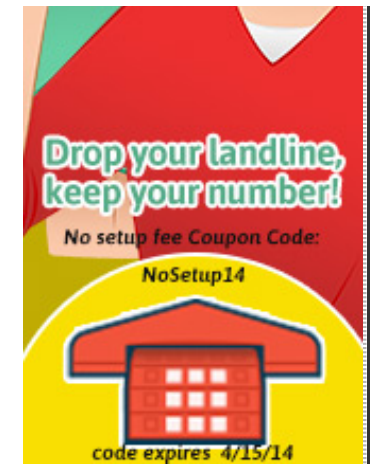
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