

The Decemberists - A biography

Life as a musician means continual evolution. Over the course of a career, any band worth paying attention to will pursue a sound, a direction, until it triggers a different idea and they're chasing some other distant dream. With their sixth album, *The King Is Dead*, The Decemberists illustrate the power that comes from this kind of creative call-and-response.

When the band completed their wildly ambitious 2009 song cycle *The Hazards of Love*, frontman and primary songwriter Colin Meloy said that "doing this album took a lot out of me, and I'm definitely curious what will come out now that I've gotten it out of my system."

The Hazards of Love, a narrative suite that grew out of old English folk tunes, met with widespread acclaim (Mojo wrote that "this spellbinding work peaks and soars with all the warmth and wonder of some great romantic adventure," while Rolling Stone gave the album four stars), and was followed by a grand-scale tour in which The Decemberists performed the project in full. But by that time, Meloy was already feeling the pull of another approach.

"Hazards was actually a bit self-destructive," he says. "We knew people might have a hard time getting into it. On tour, we would play the whole thing -- but once we were onstage at Bonnaroo or wherever, I just kind of wanted to play some normal songs!"

Inspired by a move to a more rural area outside the band's base of Portland, Oregon, Meloy took a few songs that had been left off of *Hazards* and started working on the kind of project he had long been thinking about -- a set of more stripped-down, country-based songs. The mostly-acoustic arrangements on *The King Is Dead* showcase the ways in which The Decemberists -- Meloy, Chris Funk, Jenny Conlee, Nate Query, and John Moen -- sound just as glorious in simple, concise compositions as they do on the elaborate structures that have defined their work for years.

As far back as 2004, the band released "The Tain," an eighteen-and-a-half minute single based on an Irish myth. *The Crane Wife* (which NPR listeners voted their favorite album of 2006) took as its starting point an ancient Japanese folk tale, which was interpreted across three separate songs, and climaxed with "The Island," a 13-minute, three-section murder ballad.

Meloy points out, however, that creating straightforward, unadorned songs can be at least as hard as building complicated musical epics. "For all my talk about how complex those records were, this one may have been harder to do," he says. "It's a real challenge to make simple music, and lot of times we had to deliberately hold off and keep more space. This record is an exercise in restraint."

It's no accident that songs like "All Arise!" and "Rise to Me," complete with Funk's plaintive pedal-steel guitar, echo the homespun sound of albums like Neil Young's *Harvest*. Meloy describes that classic as "the quintessential barn record," and it was the concept of the barn -- as recording space and as attitude -- that informed the making of *The King Is Dead*. The album was recorded in a converted barn at Pendarvis Farm -- home of the annual Pickathon indie roots music festival -- an 80-acre estate of lush meadows, forest, and Mt. Hood views outside of Portland. "We wanted that ethos," he says. "That was the color we wanted the record to have."

The country-rock sound of the 1970s was also behind the decision to bring in Americana luminary Gillian Welch, who sings on seven of the album's ten songs. "Some of my favorite country-rock records had that consistent pairing with a female voice, like Gram Parsons and Emmylou Harris or Neil and Nicolette Larson on *Comes a Time*," says Meloy. "We thought it'd be great if there was a female foil to my singing and Gillian was sweet enough to come on board."

For some of the album's other songs, The Decemberists were able to reel in one of their actual inspirations into the recording studio. "A few things, like 'Down by the Water' and 'Calamity Song,' were out-and-out homages to R.E.M.," says Meloy. "Robyn Hitchcock was opening some of our shows, and Peter Buck plays in his group. I mentioned to him that I was writing some songs that were really ripping off his style, and he

thought it was funny, so it seemed like, why not get him in and just wear it on our sleeves?" Buck wound up adding his signature propulsive, chiming guitar on those two songs, and contributing a mandolin part to the opener "Don't Carry It All."

Another of the album's guest contributors is violinist Annalisa Tornfelt, a collaborator along with Funk, Conlee, and Query in the noir bluegrass band Black Prairie. Tornfelt's rousing fiddle adorns "Don't Carry It All," "All Arise!," and "Rox In The Box."

For all of the album's shift in musical direction, though, *The King Is Dead* is still clearly a Decemberists album, especially in the usage of imagery taken from landscapes, plants, and water throughout the lyrics. "The syntax of *The Decemberists* is definitely still there," says Meloy. "I didn't want it to be too much of a departure. But where the nature motifs were more mystical on *The Hazards of Love*, the flora of this record are more of a pastoral backdrop."

To Colin Meloy, in some ways *The King is Dead* represents his own musical journey coming full circle. "Over the last eleven years or so, since I moved to Portland, I feel like I've been mining mostly English traditions for influence", he says. "I guess I've kind of come back to a lot of the more American music that got me going in the first place -- R.E.M. and Camper Van Beethoven and all these bands that borrowed from more American traditions like Neil Young and the Byrds."

"Sometimes I kind of miss the epic-ness of the other albums," he continues, "but it's nice to get all of the information across in three minutes. It's like going from reading a novel to reading a bunch of short stories."

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