



**“When we first started out, I wasn’t as confident having my name on an album cover”**



# DAVID RAWLINGS

*Back with his third solo album, David Rawlings talks borrowing and transforming to keep the spirit of folk music alive*

WORDS: DAN HOBSON

David Rawlings is a man of many talents. Singer, Grammy-nominated songwriter, producer, award-winning guitarist, Rawlings is a man who truly lives and breathes music. Since launching his career with 1996’s *Revival* – an album billed under Gillian Welch’s name, but featuring the indispensable co-writing, harmony-singing and instrumental chops of her musical partner – Rawlings has gone on to become one of the giants of the Americana scene.

For his third solo album, *Poor David’s Almanack*, Rawlings has looked to archetypal folk and Americana songs for inspiration; absorbing them and creating something unique. Half of the album was written alone without longtime writing partner Welch – a first for Rawlings – and many songs have already become staples of his live show.

While recording the album to analog tape at Woodland Studios, East Nashville, Rawlings experimented with overdubs and other layered effects. Assisting him were a pair of top-shelf engineers: longtime collaborator Matt Andrews and legendary studio hand Ken Scott, whose work can be heard on landmark albums by the Beatles, David Bowie, and Elton John.

Influenced by new experiences, old sounds and classic books – including Benjamin Franklin’s *Poor Richard’s Almanack*, whose title serves as the basis for Rawlings’ own album – *Poor David’s Almanack* nods to its source material without borrowing.

A leader of the contemporary folk revival, Rawlings began releasing albums with Welch in the mid-90s, championing acoustic music in the grunge era. For more than two decades since, he has juggled multiple roles as a frontman, duo partner, sideman and behind-the-scenes producer.

**Where are you now and what are you up to?**

I’m in Albany, New York. We played a show here last night at The Egg.

**The new record is out now. What can we expect from the third?**

Well, on the last record, we had written a batch of songs that had a certain amount of weight to them, with expansive forms. A number of them ‘The Weekend’, ‘Short Haired Woman Blues’ and ‘The Pilgrim’ had an almost modern song form; verse, pre-chorus, then chorus. I don’t know why we were writing like that, but that’s what our minds were playing around with. So a lot of these songs got stretched out, and it colored the way they were arranged and performed. They were a great addition to the live show and it was interesting to take those longer journeys with people.

Over the course of a show, though, I felt like it was hard as a performer and I kept feeling like I wanted to intersperse simpler folk songs. Sometimes we would throw in a cover or something from an earlier record. After a break in the Nashville Obsolete touring last summer, I started, quite inadvertently, to write these songs. By the fall, I had six or seven written so I put them in the show and they went down really well. I began a bunch of those shows with ‘Midnight Train’.

**You’re now under the name David Rawlings, rather than David Rawlings Machine. What was the decision behind that?**

It was simplicity more than anything else. We’d come up with the Machine name a few years ago, but it just felt like it was time to write some of the songs by myself. It felt like more of a classic name to play under. When we first started out doing the Machine, I wasn’t as confident having my name on an album cover.

But now, I thought it's ok – it's not going to confuse anyone [laughs].

**The record has been crafted on analog tape. What would you say are the advantages of using tape, rather than digital?**

From the very first recordings we made, which were produced by T Bone Burnett, we've always recorded on tape – it's the way I learned to make records. Shortly after we made our first record, Gillian and I bought a tape machine and started accumulating a studio over time. I think the first record I produced for us was *Time (The Revelator)*. The truth is, I never saw much advantage of moving into the digital world for the music we record. Maybe if you want to loop or have an unlimited number of tracks, maybe. But those things don't really suit us or give us very much. By nature, digital recording is a lower quality recording because you have to go through a converter which changes everything from analog to digital and that conversion is very different to the conversion you get when you take an electrical signal and turn it to a magnetic signal on tape. Tape is a different medium to us. It's the medium that I know how to work on and love the sound of. People make wonderful records on digital audio and I hesitate to criticise it, but it's not for what we do.

When we were first recording at the house, we were on the flight path at Nashville airport, in this little tiny cabin with a tiny two-track. We could start recording at midnight when the last plane stopped flying and we could work until 5.30am when they started flying again. So for a long time, when Gillian and I were working on things in the late 90s, we were completely nocturnal. That's just how we had to be [laughs].

**You've been touring the States a lot recently. Any plans to visit the UK ?**

We are planning on coming over soon but I'm not sure when, next summer or late Spring is likely. Nothing's firm, but I know there are conversations being had and it's been a while since we've been over.

I have to say I always love playing in the UK – it's always been one of our favourite places to tour. The audiences are always fantastic. The people who come to the shows tend to be so knowledgeable about the music I love, we all love, which elevates the shows. In different parts of the States you have very different audiences and you can tailor shows a little bit. If you're in the South East, for instance, you'll get people more familiar with the bluegrass side of things. But people into folk music – or the American version of folk music – really have a great knowledge and understanding of it. Which is great.



### GEARBOX

On this record I didn't play my 1935 Epiphone Olympic much. I only played a solo on 'Cumberland Gap'. On this record I played a 1956 D'Angelico Excel, which was rather new to me and I liked playing a different guitar. It had a larger body with a little more fullness. Gillian played a 1960 Gibson Hummingbird that was strung Nashville style. We may bring these guitars on the road too. I've done my entire career with a 1935 Epiphone – I don't understand why you'd spend your life playing a guitar that didn't sound as good because you didn't want to bring your vintage guitar on the road. Generally, though, for the live shows, Willie Watson plays Larrivé guitar and banjo, Gillian plays a Gibson J-50 and I play my little 1935 Epiphone and a bit of banjo as well.

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**You've written songs with Ryan Adams in the past. What was it like working with him?**

Well, I guess I met Ryan on a Gram Parsons tribute in New York that we both did. We hit it off fairly well that night. I remember we banged around on a piano, sang some songs, and drank some whiskey, it was a great time. Shortly thereafter he moved to Nashville and we would get together at the little house that planes flew over and I've got loads of tapes of us jamming there in the back room. Ryan's a guy who has boundless energy and is always incredibly excited about the music he's making. We've worked on lots of songs.

**How did you first get into playing the guitar?**

I remember being 16 and going for a pizza with a very good friend of mine in the middle of the winter – really snowing hard. As we walked home, he said “you should see if you can get your parents to get you an acoustic guitar for Christmas”. He said, “I'm going to get my parents to buy me a harmonica and we'll play 'Heart of Gold' at the talent show”, so, lo and behold, my parents managed to spend \$30 on this very cheap little acoustic guitar and as soon as I got it, and worked through the tuition book in a couple of days, I immediately knew I had the facility for it. I met a kid who lived just

across the highway whose dad taught guitar. Within the week I became friends with him and he taught me 'Heart of Gold'. His father had actually stopped teaching, but I kept asking him, and eventually he said he would teach me but I would have to practice hard. There was this understanding that if I didn't put in the work, he would stop. He was a great teacher.

**Tell me about your songwriting process...**

Over the years, we have written songs every way you can imagine. This batch, I was trying to find little pieces of traditional songs and to adapt and make my own. I looked for melodies, chords and systems that were simple but strong. I played them, absorbed them and made them into my own thing. I tried to find melodies and adapt them or find form and add to them in the folk tradition.

It happens to every writer – you write a song and three years later realise it's melodically based off this other song. You didn't know it at the time, but the musical part of you just does it instinctively. That's the point of this evolving, ever-changing, ever-alive thing that we call folk music. ■

**Poor David's Almanack is out now.  
Info: [www.davidrawlingsmusic.com](http://www.davidrawlingsmusic.com)**