

Vincent Neil Emerson: Giving A Voice Through Song
By: Soda Canter

Filmmaker Ava Lowrey's documentary *The River Bottom* provides first hand accounts of the impact that the creation of the Toledo Bend Reservoir had on the cultural history of the Choctaw-Apache tribe of Ebarb, Louisiana. The tribe had been stewards of the land in western Louisiana for hundreds of years until 1963 when the government of Texas and Louisiana forced the tribe to leave over 180,000 acres of their ancestral land to create the reservoir. Despite this devastation, and not yet receiving profoundly deserved federal recognition, the displaced tribe continues to build community and awareness of their rich heritage by teaching traditions through storytelling as demonstrated in Lowrey's impactful film.

In August 2021, *Western AF* shared a performance of Vincent Neil Emerson's song "The Ballad of the Choctaw-Apache" from his self-titled sophomore effort. A song that gives reverence to the displacement of these people. The song itself and the subsequent collection was a slight departure from his vintage leaning and downright humorous debut *Fried Chicken and Evil Women*. While Emerson had become known for his gifted songwriting, what has lingered from this specific performance was his honest and fearless storytelling. Storytelling that gave yet another voice to the Toledo Bend Reservoir devastation and further invited the listener to journey into Emerson's own exploration of his Choctaw-Apache heritage. The results were immediately impactful and have continued to resonate even years later with countless recent comments from viewers exclaiming that the powerful force of Emerson's artistry has given the indigenous a voice through song.

On his new album *The Golden Crystal Kingdom*, Emerson continues to expand this voice with a collection that seeks to create a safe space for those that have felt voiceless and alone. This intention is immediately noted in the dedication. Instead of listing a roster of contributors Emerson dedicates the album to anyone that doesn't feel "like they belong anywhere" and further states "as long as you are listening you are not alone." When asked about his decision to stray from standard album practices, Emerson shares, "I wanted to show appreciation for people that feel like me sometimes. I've felt like that for most of my life and wanted to give something to those people out there. Like me."

Building space for fostering these types of relationships seems to be an ever-present constant in Emerson's life as he appears absolutely driven to find others that are open to real connection. This spans from his engagement with a dedicated fanbase, building loyal relationships with fellow country artists, and finding other creatives willing to build equal partnerships for projects. A most recent example of the latter is his new found relationship with Shooter Jennings who produced *The Golden Crystal Kingdom*.

A single listen to the album immediately demonstrates the solidity of their relationship as the collection astonishes from song to song by exploring Emerson's sound through more rock leaning landscapes. Of the recording relationship, Emerson shares, "Most producers would want full demos or an entire layout. Not Shooter. He trusted me. I'd bring him all these songs

that no one had heard before and we'd sit with the band in the control room to make notes. Discuss the vibe. The goal was always to serve the song. The production might evolve from take to take but we stayed true to the original intention for each." Emerson often speaks of service to the song which for him begins at the song's inception. While there are moments of creativity on the road, Emerson's preference for creation is by staging a solitary space for his songwriting process, usually in a house all alone. Yet he notes that this surprisingly changed with the sweeping album opener "Time of The Rambler." Emerson shares, "During these sessions, I was actually staying at Shooter's house. One of the nights we came home after working on the record and I sat by myself in his basement. I wrote that song then. The next morning I woke up and asked him to check it out. We recorded it that day. To write a song and record it the next day was a first for me."

Though not all songs from *The Golden Crystal Kingdom* are written by Emerson. He chose to honor a few other songwriters with his own interpretations of Buffy Sainte-Marie's "Co'dine" and good friend Charley Crockett's "Time of the Cottonwood Trees." His inclusion of the latter song was a no-brainer for Emerson. He explained, "I really wanted to pay tribute to Charley since he cut my song "7 Come 11" for one of his albums. I was on tour with him last year. We hit the road for about 3 months. It was nice to spend time with him and flesh out new material. He's the kind of guy that can write a song in a crowded room. On another level, I respect that. He was working out the song "Time of the Cottonwood Trees" every night by himself. I related to it so much. I thought it was one of the best songs he's ever written."

Similarly, *The Golden Crystal Kingdom* contains some of the finest songs that Emerson has ever written. Songs that create space for honest reflection about topics that might feel polarizing yet Emerson's talent in delivery makes them supremely accessible. These performances transcend standard measure and seem as if Emerson was personally called to deliver these messages. This is first noticeable on the alternative infused "The Man from Uvalde" that reflects on the tragic school shooting in Uvalde, Texas. Emerson shared, "I was sitting on my couch watching the news and had my guitar in my hand. I was watching the story unfold and learning about this tragedy that went down. At the time I was living in San Antonio, Uvalde was right down the road. I immediately thought about my son and what all those parents that lost their children might have felt. It hit me as a father. I felt like I needed to put it on the album."

Though it is the chilling album closer "Little Wolf's Invisible Yellow Medicine Paint" that hangs in the air long after the final seconds of play. A song that definitively demonstrates some of the best writing not just by Emerson but by any artist in recent history. Emerson reflects, "I remember when I wrote that song. It was within the time period of Uvalde. I was thinking about my ancestors and trying to craft the story. It felt special to me. As the first single, hearing people in the crowd sing it now brings a tear to my eye. There is so much power in music. That's what it goes to show." Listening to Emerson reflect on his heritage and the power of music it is hard not to think of the Choctaw-Apache community tribe members interviewed in Lowrey's documentary. Though robbed of their rightful spaces they still tenderly choose to share love of each other and remain hopeful for the future generations of their own tribe. Generations who, like Emerson, will

be driven to resiliently shape and share their sacred traditions through visceral storytelling. Storytelling that will undoubtedly open ears, change minds, and grow understanding.

Though this choice isn't easy. This type of honesty in storytelling requires a steadfast commitment to self and further wholehearted bravery. When asked about his advice for others, Emerson tenderly shares, "I think as artists we have to not worry about what the rest of the world thinks. Not cater to a specific audience or to be accepted by a certain group of people. Because if we are not being honest in our music and ourselves it leads to unhappiness and discontent. If you share your whole story and who you are, you might be able to find a whole group of people who love and accept who you are exactly."