

The River Keeper

OKKERVIL RIVER LOOKS BACK WHILE MOVING FORWARD

By Will Kennedy

PHOTO BY SHERVIN LAINEZ

From the outside, the creative process seems so mysterious and alchemical. We want in on it, to take nip off that bottle, to be there in the moment when these works come into the world — works that add so much comfort and order to an otherwise chaotic existence.

How do songwriters do what they do? We want to know, so sometimes I ask.

Will Sheff declines to comment. In fact, he refuses.

“That’s a sacred process,” he tells me over the phone. “Writing a song could be highly organized or

banally businesslike. Or it could be like David Bowie cutting up pieces of newspaper and throwing them on the floor while high on cocaine. It’s bad to assume there’s only one way to write a song.”

Since the late ’90s, Sheff has been the primary creative force behind **Okkervil River**, playing smart and wordy indie pop that fits Austin’s non-conformist reputation without following the map toward everything Austin is today — outliers in a town that set the tone for outliers becoming insiders.

Sometimes more informed by Roxy Music or Bowie than any kind of Austin sound, Okkervil River plays

thesaurus-pop along the lines of The Decemberists, delivered in Sheff’s vulnerable yet somehow crooning tenor.

From 2018’s *In the Rainbow Rain*, the song “Famous Tracheotomies” tells the story of Sheff’s health issues as a boy, paralleling his own tracheotomy with other artists who had something similar happen to them, including Ray Davies of The Kinks. Near the end of the song, Sheff makes the interesting choice to overlay the musical theme of The Kinks-tune “Waterloo Sunset,” a song inspired by Davies’ hospital stay following his own surgery.

The well-known melancholy tune sparkles at the edge of consciousness, exactly the kind of texture Sheff adds to his music, making it heady and conceptual while also remaining strikingly personal.

Now, Sheff and Okkervil River are out on the road promoting *A Dream in the Dark: Two Decades of Okkervil River Live*, a sort of album-of-the-month mail order program that gets you 12 digital albums culled from Okkervil River’s extensive archive of live material.

In addition, they come back through Eugene on the Rarities and Requests 2019 tour, for which Okkervil fans could submit set-list requests online. The submission period ended in late May.

“I always archived everything,” Sheff explains. “I’ve always been pretty obsessive about collecting my life.”

Putting together this series of live albums allowed Sheff to take his back catalog of live material and make something new from it.

“Brush it up, sculpt it and make art out of it,” he says. In doing so, Sheff noticed how much some of these songs changed after being played night after night.

“I was playing the songs completely differently by the end of the tour,” he says. “This was a way to take certain albums and, without ‘George Lucas-ing’ them, say, ‘Here’s another take on the same song.’”

Okkervil River plays 7 pm Sunday, June 23, at Sessions Music Lounge; \$18 advance, \$22 door, 21-plus.

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