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In 1956, the legendary Jimmy Martin hired a Kentucky banjo player fresh out of high school, a kid named **J.D. Crowe**. Young Crowe, who picked up the five-string banjo after hearing Earl Scruggs, worked with Martin for five years ? learning invaluable lessons in musicianship, band leading, and harmony singing in the process. His already remarkable banjo playing ? clean, crisp, and always in the pocket no matter what the tempo ? propelled him toward the launch of the Kentucky Mountain Boys with Doyle Lawson, Red Allen (later replaced by Larry Rice), and Bobby Slone. When Lawson departed to join the Country Gentlemen in the early ?70s, the Kentucky Mountain Boys gave way to J.D. Crowe and the New South.

The New South lineup of Crowe, Tony Rice, Jerry Douglas, Ricky Skaggs, and Bobby Slone is considered by many as one of the best bluegrass bands that ever existed, and its eponymous 1975 album, known by some as *Old Home Place* and by others simply as *Rounder 0044*, is considered by many as one of the best and most influential bluegrass recordings ever made.

J.D. won a Grammy in 1983 (with the New South, Best Country Instrumental for ?Fireball) and

became a member of the IBMA Hall of Honor in 2003. In December, he'll receive an honorary Doctor of Arts degree from the University of Kentucky. The first bluegrass musician to receive such an honor from UK was Bill Monroe, who was granted the degree in 1984.

Except for a break between 1988 and 1994, when he worked for the United States Post Office, J.D. Crowe has been a full-time working musician all his life. He's now decided to retire for good -- and in this exclusive interview with **Caroline Wright**, he talks about what compelled his decision, his own bluegrass heroes, his favorite gig ever, and more?

CAROLINE WRIGHT for IB: Congratulations on your retirement! When exactly did you make the decision to retire?

Probably about a year ago. It was something I wanted to do. It was time. I feel good about it. I put in my time.

IB: Are you stepping away from the scene completely ? touring, performing, recording, everything?

I'm not going to have a band anymore. I'm going to be doing some playing with Longview and with the Bluegrass Album Band ? a few shows, probably -- and then myself, Doyle Lawson and Paul Williams are getting together some shows for 2013? and I'll get together with Del McCoury, Bobby Osborne, Bobby Hicks, and Jerry McCoury for the Masters Of Bluegrass.



Most of us have been in the business a long time, and we're cutting back and getting close to retirement. We just got together and agreed it would be a neat thing to do for a little while, and still be involved in the playing. We all love it; we don't want to totally quit.

IB: The last time I saw you, we had a conversation about how hard it is to be on the road. What's the most challenging thing about being a bandleader? What are the things you won't miss?

You always worry about making sure you can get there, and that you have transportation, that the guys know what's going on; you have to get your motels? You've just got all this pressure on you, making sure you get there and back home safely. I just think it's time to do something a little different. I'm ready for it.

IB: What are the things you will miss most about being on the road?

The camaraderie of being with my picking buddies... Seeing a lot of friends and acquaintances I've had for years and years? I think I probably miss that as much as anything.

IB: As a man who's about to retire, what's your best advice for a musician?

Everybody's different. Of course, my wife's always said I've been retired most of my life anyway! You play all weekend and you're home for four or five days??

IB: Have you and your wife managed to tuck away a nest egg for retirement?

Yes, we have. Another thing I won't miss is the economics of the business right now. Everything's just so outlandishly high! Fuel, motel rooms, food? If you're gonna be comfortable, it costs a lot to travel. I figure I've done it long enough that if I can't be comfortable, then I don't wanna do it. The economics right now just aren't good. Someone starting out is going to have a rough time. I'm not sure they're gonna tough it out. How much effort do you want to put in? How much sacrifice do you want to make? How much frustration do you want? A lot of people don't want to do what it takes, but that's what happens in the music business, unless you're awful lucky.

IB: What is your biggest regret as a bluegrass musician? What do you wish you might have done better or differently ? or maybe not done at all?

We all can look back and see things we should have done a little differently, and maybe better? but you just do at the time what you think will work. The one thing I tried to do was to have good people in the band. You try to impress the new guys who come into the band: *If you're gonna play in this band, you play what we do.* I always wanted a band sound. I didn't want my musicians to play as individuals. I wanted them to play as a *band*. That's what makes good music.



IB: Do you think you achieved that for the most part with the New South?

Pretty much. I think so, yes.

IB: When you think about the 'New South sound,' who are the band members who exemplified that sound?

I think the band would have to be myself, Tony Rice, Ricky Skaggs, Bobby Sloan and Jerry Douglas. When you say *New South*, that's what people think of. Although I had some good bands after that! We were different, though; we didn't sound the same. That was my doing. You can't ever duplicate the same sound. It's too much effort. New people came into the

band, and as long as they knew the material and knew what we did, by God I let em have their way to sing it. You can't make somebody sound like somebody else. It doesn't work. You have to let 'em sound like themselves, and not try to change them.

IB:Doesn't that sort of contradict what you said about having a band sound?

That's what I wanted at the time, because every time somebody changes - especially the lead singer. Your sound changes. I was willing to go 51%-49% to them.

IB:They could bring their own unique sound as long as they were willing to compromise and contribute to the band sound?

That's right! It's a two-way thing. You have to use people to the best of their abilities, you know. There's some bands where, when people leave, they bring someone in that sounds close to what they had before, but most of the time, they're gonna change a little, especially your lead singer. It changed when Ricky and Tony left; it changed when I added Glenn Lawson and Jimmy Gaudreau? We had it together but it was different. When Keith Whitley came in the band, that was a different sound, but that's what I wanted at the time. I didn't try to make him sound like somebody else. You really can't do that. It just doesn't work. You have to let 'em have a little of what *they* can do. They have to feel comfortable.

The main things I stressed: Know all the material, get the timing, and work as a group. That's all I required.

IB:Who are YOUR bluegrass heroes? Who do you admire, in and out of bluegrass music?

Two names: *Flatt* and *Scruggs*. That's why I play the banjo. If not for them I would probably be playing electric guitar somewhere! I'd just be one of a trillion guitar players in the world.

I personally don't think that there will ever be another band like Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs. If there is, it will probably not be in my lifetime, if I live to be 100. There's a lot of good pickers, but there's just something about those guys? They were just more determined; they had the business savvy; they were just so *professional*. When they hit the stage, you knew they meant business.

You can't sound like everybody else; you've gotta have your own thing. It's really hard to try to get something different and keep it in perspective with bluegrass without making a drastic change. People condemn bands for not sounding like so-and-so and this or that. But you can't do that! You can't sound like somebody else. You've gotta do your own thing. That's what I always suggest any band do: try to do their own deal, whether it's good, bad or indifferent! Do what *you* feel like. Everybody has their mentors and their heroes, but I've always believed in the saying that you cannot beat a man at his own game.

IB:From your perspective, what have been the biggest changes in bluegrass music and the bluegrass industry during the span of your career?

To be honest with you, I don't see too much change. The only thing that's changed is it's got more musicians.

IB:When and where exactly is your last gig with the New South?

December 9 at the Birchmere. We always have a good time over there. It just happens that's the way it turned out.



IB:If you could relive one gig again, which one would it be?

It would have to be 1975, the year we went to Japan! The band was myself, Skaggs, Rice, Douglas, and Sloan. That was our first appearance there. We were treated like royalty. We landed in Tokyo and an entourage met us; there must have been 30 people! We never touched our baggage or our instruments. They totally took charge. The promoter, who I knew very well, spoke great English, and of course we always had interpreters with us. They said, "Don't worry about it! Your instruments will be safe." Of course you know how we felt about our instruments! We just let those guys take care of it. When we got to the venue, our instruments would be backstage, and all we had to do was tune them up and go out and play.

We were over there for 10 days and it was just a whirlwind. It was a great, great time. The people had such a great appreciation for the music. We knew they would enjoy it, but it was just really far more than we ever expected. Every show was sold out. At our next-to-the-last concert, we were in Tokyo, I think, and when we finished, they stormed the stage! The Japanese police officers had to literally get us out of the building, and they took us out back to the limo, and people were climbing on the cars when we left! That was really a scary experience. But that's how much they enjoyed it. That's how they showed their appreciation. For one night, I knew how Elvis felt.

We went back in '79 and Keith Whitley was with me, and a totally different band. It wasn't quite as *intense* as the first time. A lot of different bands had been over there between '75 and '79 so they were exposed to it a lot more. But it was still great!

IB:What would you like to say to promoters of bluegrass music? Any words of wisdom or advice?

The only thing I can say, really, which I've preached for years, is that *they need to update their sound people*. I have played on so many bad sound systems—except sometimes it wasn't all a problem with the systems themselves; it was the people who operate them. *They're fooling with the soundboard the whole time you're up there performing!*

That's a thing with the bluegrass industry: they'll spend \$50,000 on talent and \$500 on a P.A. system. Tell me *that* makes sense! They get cheap sound systems and people running

em for little or nothing. When people pay money for a ticket, they expect to hear what they hear on the CD; a lot of times they don't even get *close* to that.

You asked a question a while ago, about what I'd miss the least? That's it, right there!
Bad sound systems.

One more thing: I don't think bluegrass music has progressed near what it should have. The talent out there has not been promoted right, and it has not progressed because of that. I hate to say this, but there are a lot of people in bluegrass that don't want it to progress too far.

IB:What do you think about that?

In layman's terms, I think that's a ***crock!*** It HAS to progress. It can't stay the same. If you're gonna stay the same, you're gonna die.

IB:The members of the New South are continuing on after you stop touring with them, as a band called American Drive. What lesson would you hope these fellows have learned from you?

<laughter> I think I've learned as much from them as they have from me! It's a two-way street there. Maybe about the music? keep it honest and do what they want to do, what they feel.



IB:What are your passions? How will you spend your days after you retire?

Oh? *loafin?!* *<laughs uproariously>* No, I've got a lot of things I like to do: I go to a lot of car shows, old relics and classics and muscle cars. I've got a couple cars, and I've got a lot of friends in the business. I like to play golf? hunt a little bit? Just maybe, I'll be able to visit some of my friends I've made down through the years. We live so far away from each other, but maybe now I'll be able to go spend a little time with them.

IB:Who will keep you company in your golden years?

Hopefully my wife will! Her name is Sheryl; she's a retired schoolteacher; she taught kindergarten and first grade. She has a lot of patience!

IB:She probably has the honey-do list all ready to go!

Oh, yeah! And I've got some things on it my own self!

IB:What?s your golf handicap?

Front nine or back nine? *<laughter>* I?m not ever gonna be a golf pro. I just go out to have fun. If it?s good, it?s great? If it?s bad, it?s *still* great.

On behalf of all your friends at IBMA, best wishes on a tuneful, productive, and happy retirement, J.D.!

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