

Opinion: Music that connects California

By Joe Mathews

What's the fastest way from Berkeley to Bakersfield?

Flip to the second disc of the album.



Joe Mathews

California's disparate regions are nearly impossible to connect. But over the past two years, two bands – with overlapping members – have pulled off the trick, issuing three albums that explore today's state from its coast to its inland deserts, from north to south. By examining the state's divides so thoroughly, those two bands – Cracker and Camper van Beethoven – show what really connects California: the wrong turns and struggles of regular Californians, not the handful of sun-splashed Silicon Valley successes.

Camper van Beethoven's two albums—2013's "La Costa Perdida" about Northern California and 2014's "El Camino Real" about Southern California – show how dream seeking remains alive and well on both ends of our state, even if the dreams seem smaller. Cracker's new double album, "From Berkeley to Bakersfield", offers one side of Bay Area folk rock, and a second side of old-school country. Despite the stylistic differences, both sides of the album depict Californians as they really are – poorer and living in grittier places, but

still carving out their own little kingdoms amidst squalor.

“Between the two bands,” David Lowery, founder and frontman for Cracker and Camper van Beethoven, told me recently, “we took the entire state apart and reassembled it.”

California, for all its dynamism, is still defined by dreamier music from previous generations – Tupac and Dre’s “California Love,” the Beach Boys, that Eagles hotel. But there has been some smart musical grappling with today’s California – from DJ Quik’s Compton rap slap at exurban sprawl –

“You couldn’t keep up with the city/ So you moved out to the desert/

And you want to blame your drama on me.

– to Becky G’s teenaged laments about foreclosure. And you can almost smell the marijuana on the title track of the latest album from the popular duo Best Coast, “California Nights”:

“I stay high all the time/Just to get by...

California nights make me feel so happy I could die.

But none of California’s classic titles compare to Cracker’s and Camper van Beethoven’s recent songs when it comes to being grounded in details of place. Both bands are established and more than 20 years old – with roots in Santa Cruz and in Redlands, in San Bernardino County. But Lowery says their deep musical dive into the state was inspired a few years back when a show at the Henry Miller Library in Big Sur got canceled, and the musicians found themselves with an unexpected week off.

The songs they produced span the state, from “Northern California Girls” to “Camp Pendleton.” In “La Costa Perdida”, Camper Van Beethoven sings of a fruit picker from near Brawley – a killer who got his heart broken “in the oil fields of San Ardo” (in Monterey County), buried his beloved in Parkfield,

and sold her car in Fresno.

The albums celebrate gritty places and people across regions. Cracker tells a Berkeley girl she's beautiful and suggests they attend "an anarchists' rally at People's Park." The main character of "King of Bakersfield" sings,

"I got a double wide in my own Merlot vineyard.

I got plenty of space to park my dually trucks."

If there's one song that binds all the work together, it's "Almond Grove," sung from the point of view of a guy from Maricopa in Kern County who goes to Oakland to work at the port, and gets involved in drugs. The song sounds like a triumphant return:

*"I'm going home to the cotton fields/ To the almond groves,
to the old homestead/See my Ma and Pa, mighty brother Jack/
He went to Kandahar, but he never come back."*

By the song's end, it's clear that he'll see his relatives because they're dead – and so is he. His ashes are going back to the almond grove.

The songs aren't angry – except about Silicon Valley. Cracker's "March of the Billionaires" thunders:

"Give up your rights, your most private thoughts, don't make us label you some kind of Luddites. It's better for us, therefore it's better for you."

The song "El Cerrito," about the Contra Costa County town, blasts at "pink-moustached taxi cabs" and offers the unforgettable chorus line, "I don't give a shit about your IPO/I live in El Cerrito."

While much of this music was made in California, Lowery doesn't live here. For family reasons, he splits his time

between Georgia and Virginia, but he plans to come back. "I would live somewhere in the High Desert. Or maybe up in the northwest corner of the state, Arcata or Crescent City."

Or perhaps, he says, in both.

It's all the same place, after all.

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