



# Artist As Leader: Bob Crawford

Though stand-up bassist Bob Crawford does not share Seth and Scott Avett's surname, he is unquestionably one of The Avett Brothers, having joined the band in 2001 before they released their first full-length album, "Country Was." Almost two decades later, with 10 albums, four Americana Music Awards and three Grammy nominations under their belt, The Avett Brothers continue to sell out their tours to tens of thousands of diehard fans even as they insist on pushing the boundaries of genre and subject matter in the folk-rock world.

In 2016 the band's creative process was examined in an HBO documentary, "May It Last: A Portrait of the Avett Brothers," co-directed by Judd Apatow. The film also documents then-seven-year-old Hallie Crawford's ongoing treatment for and rehabilitation from brain cancer and a surgery she received when she was only two. The documentary also shows how a family of tight-knit musical collaborators and the fans they'd gathered over the years rallied around a family in need. Bob and his wife Melanie went on to join two other families as the leadership of the Press On Fund, which raises money to discover groundbreaking cures and therapies for childhood cancers.

In this interview with Rob Kramer, Bob Crawford discusses how a shared-leadership model has worked for the band and how, though he eschews the term leader, he has earned a community that not only feeds his creative career but also fights for the things he holds dear.

**Rob Kramer: Do you see yourself as a leader?**

**Bob Crawford:** No. [He chuckles.] No, I think what happens in the case of The Avett Brothers and with the success of the band and the fanbase that we somehow have been so blessed to be supported by, over time — because we're almost 19 years old as an organization, as a band — you realize that what you started out doing for yourself has come to mean a whole lot for a whole lot of people. There is a duty to uphold that in the best possible way, in the most responsible and respectful way.

**Rob: It's interesting because you're in a family band, and you hear all these stories about how tension and craziness can happen in family bands. How have you developed your dynamic of where you fit into the structure of that and when you follow, when you step in and lead? How did you work through that and figure out where your role is in the band and family dynamics?**

**Bob:** A lot of that was worked out just in day-to-day life without realizing it was being worked out. The thing about Scott and Seth is, they've had their moments of conflict, but rarely has it ever been ... I guess how I put it is, I've only had to leave the room about once or twice in 20 years, where it's like, "OK, these guys have to work this out alone." Usually I try to follow their lead. We are 33% of the decision-making, so there are times where I have to make a decision and I have to choose a side based on the facts and the situation at the time.

**Rob:** Now, are you talking in the creative or administrative work?

**Bob:** Both. More in the administrative side. But there have been times where even with the set list decision or a song decision, it's become absurdly contentious. There are certain things that become contentious occasionally. After you get past that moment, you look back on it and say, "This wasn't contentious because this was a hard song decision to make or a placement of a song in the setlist or an argument over a chord. This was contentious because we're all tired." [He laughs.]

Yeah, I am the third vote often. We do have a rule where if two say yes, it carries the day. But then there are other situations where that's not 100%. Something that I'm not going to get into right now came up recently. It was a two-to-one, and the one carried the day because there were other circumstances that deserved respect and understanding.

I think what I want to say here is that with Scott and Seth, they were literally raised by their parents to say, "Hey, you're each other's best friend. It's a hard world. There's a lot of people out there that are going to be against you. You guys need to be there for each other." I think just that belief and those guys being rooted in that mitigates things before they get off the rails.

**Rob: How did you build trust with each other? You're the outsider and the third leg of the stool, right? How do you build trust where your voice matters, your opinion matters, your presence matters?**

**Bob:** I think I built trust a few ways because yes, we were all much younger, it was a completely different time of our lives. They had come out of a rock band that the wheels were coming off. The thing was they were all very close friends. They were a very tight group of guys — Scott, Seth and the other guys in the group — since childhood for most of them, so it was very painful. I think when I came about, they didn't want to get attached to anybody. They wanted someone who worked for them even at that point, I think.

It was a slow process, but the way I did it was ... I was at school at Winthrop University in Rockhill, SC; Seth was still in school at UNCC; Scott had just graduated at ECU; and we would go play weekends. At the end of the weekend, I would get a roll of \$200, \$300 if it was a good weekend. I noticed one night Scott counted all the money. He gave me mine. They were going to put theirs into the band. They were like, "Well, let's put ours into the band account." I said, "Well, put some of mine in there too." I think that was one thing.

**Rob:** What was your logic behind that choice?

**Bob:** Investing in and being a part of the team, I guess. Belonging, I guess, seeing their example. Then we recorded "Country Was," which was an eight-song EP.

**Rob:** Your first album?

**Bob:** Yeah. Technically the second Avett ... . They did an EP a year before that with like four songs, before I was with them. In fact, when I started playing with them, it was called "Nemo Back Porch Project." Nemo was their rock band.

Scott was going to pay me for my time for the recording. I said, "Well, I want to be a part of the record. I want to get my cut. I'd rather not to be paid now and just be a part of the record." I think that was another thing.

Then I booked our first tour out of North Carolina in 2002 using the Internet at the time, which was a new thing for me. I booked us a 21-day tour. It was like sports bars and Irish pubs and terrible places. [Chuckling] Wonderful people! We met wonderful people. I give those guys [Seth and Scott] a lot of credit for just believing in me to do ... . They didn't think I would do it. I did it. We went on that tour. For us at the time, it was very successful, and there were people that wanted us to come back. We believed that, "Well, these people want us to come back. We got to come back!" I think that was one of the major things that propelled us to keep us going.

At the same time, while we were doing that tour, we sent out applications to do the NACA [National Association for Campus Activities] Conference, which is a conference of college student unions. They book the entertainment for the semester. And we got accepted to showcase at one of those. I think those two events were very important for us as far as deciding for Scott and I to not go to graduate school, which we were both accepted into and expecting to do. I think they saw that I was a hard worker.

**Rob: Reflecting back, how do you think your upbringing, your musical training and your artistic sense of self have informed how you show up in the band and how you show up as a leader?**

**Bob:** Well, again all these years on, it's all so different now than it was in the earlier days. I think some things have happened in that time that have changed the way I look at my role or what can I do to benefit ... . What can I represent up here that is of value to people that are into the band or just watching us?

I think my experience with my daughter having cancer and taking a year off and then coming back and loyalty to the guys, just sharing in that, just being a part of the family ... . There's a fabric.

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I think we all together, all of us up on that stage, we created a fabric. In all the ups and downs — we've had divorces, we've had tragedies with children, we've experienced deaths of loved ones together — I think that that weaved a fabric. The music, I think, very much reflects that.

When I took my year off, I would show up periodically. That was a time of, "Do I come back? If I do come back, how do I come back? What is that like? Do I want to come back?" Because I would come back, and I would find myself in my heart just bitter, seeing people celebrating, having a great time. I'm leaving St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, going down to Mississippi, playing a gig where people are, as they should be, celebrating and enjoying life. Meanwhile an hour or two hours away, there's this hospital full of really sick children. Many of them aren't going to make it. "What is this? What am I doing?"

But then I remember one letter in particular from a person who had gone to see us before their brain tumor surgery. I received another from someone who saw us shortly after a surgery, just telling me, "Seeing you up there, that represents me." That's such a small segment of the population, but that's someone who's underrepresented.

Then when the documentary was made about us, there's just scenes of my daughter getting her G-tube feeds and her getting medicine through her G-tube. Parents are writing in and saying, "My kid's got a G-tube. Thank you." In the years since, if I get jaded or exhausted or tired or question: "What am I doing? What's the bigger thing here? I have lived the teenage dream of being a touring rock musician. I'm 48 years old. What's the bigger play here? What does this really mean? Where is our meaning in this other than of doing something and just being flashy about doing something?" I think that's what I always go back to. There is a bigger thing here.

**Rob: Is your work with the Press On Fund a creative act for you?**

**Bob:** It's a duty. Press On is a duty. I think if you don't have a child who's been seriously ill, there's a feeling that, "Well, I can take care of my child. Whatever comes, we can fend it off in some way. We'll take him to the doctor. 99.9% of the time, it's not a complete tragedy or it's not something that's incurable or not treatable. That's so rare."

So when that happens, you become unmoored from even your sense of the role of a parent and that one job you have, which is to keep your kid alive. When you can't do that any longer or keep your child safe, when it's been revealed . . . . None of us have any control over our lives at all, but we put up this facade that we do have control of our lives. When it is revealed to us that we have no control and that we're walking a fragile road here, then you're like, "Well, I'm going to do everything I can." You see this happen a lot. You see a lot of children will get cancer and their parents will start a foundation, which is an incredible amount of work. It is incredible. They throw their heart and soul into it. I think that's just a response. "We've got to do something. I don't know what to do."

What makes Press On special is that we have a scientific advisory board. The Chance family, the Simkins family and the Crawford family, we make the decision on where the money goes. We have the final say. That puts the parents in the driver's seat. People give to St. Jude in my daughter's name all the time, and I tell them, "Don't stop doing that. Give to St. Jude. That's a great place to give your money. We've been the beneficiaries of that charity for years. But there's Press On too. Wherever your heart leads you, whatever you feel good about, the Crawfords are good with that. They're good with either choice."

**Rob: I gather that the life experiences that you and Seth and Scott have had, that you've allowed that with humility and gratitude and vulnerability to weave into the band's creative process. Have there ever been moments when you've just wanted to shut all that out and just concentrate on music alone?**

**Bob:** You can't. You can't. This has come up with the recent album because we've had songs on this record that are more sociopolitical. "We Americans" and "Bang Bang." When we were in our late 20s, early 30s, we were writing songs about girls and cars. [Laughing] You approach 50, and you're writing songs about the world around you and what you see and what you've experienced on a daily basis.

I think there are some things that are non-negotiables. I think "We Americans," I don't see a controversy with that song because that's, as someone who studies history, that's non-negotiable. That's true. That song is true. I unfortunately was on Instagram or something, and somebody made a comment about it like, "How I wish they wouldn't play that propaganda." I'm just thinking, "This isn't propaganda."

My first reaction to that song that was written by Seth was, "Seth has been reading Henry Adams!" For me, Scott is the carnival barker; Seth's the crooner. Scott is baring the soul like a preacher; Seth is the eloquent wordsmith. If you read American history, Henry Adams knew how to write prose. He knew how to write history. He understood history as prose.

I remembered that couple of years ago, Seth had started reading Henry Adams, and I was like, “Oh, yeah. This makes perfect sense.” To me, it was like, “Yes, of course. The two go great together.” The first thing I thought when he played “We Americans” for me was, “This is the natural product of Seth reading Henry Adams.” I hope this makes people read Henry Adams. I said to him, “You know, you’re going to need a bibliography for this song. Historians are going to want to see your work. What’s the historiography here?” And he has a bibliography for it; he’s done his job. People can write a counter-“We Americans” if they wish, but I think it stands on strong historical footing. There are sources and footnotes, and there’s evidence. So that is not controversial to me.

**Rob:** Is that an act of leadership, to write something like that?

**Bob:** Well, if you want to talk about an act of leadership, all these songs are an act of leadership. “Carolina Jubilee,” a lot of songs about girls and cars ... it’s hard to sing those songs now. We’ve done a few this year, and it’s like kind of not there anymore. Like the song “Sorry Man.” You’re singing a song about going to some girl’s parents and saying, “Me and your daughter are out of here,” and you’re a 45-year-old man, that’s kind of creepy, right? [He laughs.] That’s kind of weird!

**Rob:** **Knowing what you know now about the trajectory you’ve had both as an artist and in your life, what advice do you wish you’d received earlier on in your career about being an artist, an artist leader who influences others?**

**Bob:** This comes to mind a lot with my kids and with my son in particular, the idea of seeking things that are lasting. Look at things as investments. The way you act, look at that as an investment in the future. The way you choose to, I don’t know, spend your money, how you choose to spend your time, where you want to put your focus of your time, that’s a great currency. I think back to my younger, younger years, and this is just probably what every middle-aged man thinks: “Man, if I’d put more time into practicing, or if I didn’t have to go to the party every night and if I was building more than I was destroying [he laughs], that would be great.” But then the other thing is, “Well, this is where I am. I’ve gotten here somehow, by the grace of God.”

**If you’re just yourself and you can be comfortable doing that and be vulnerable and be genuine, somebody is going to notice that, recognize that, respect that and appreciate it.**

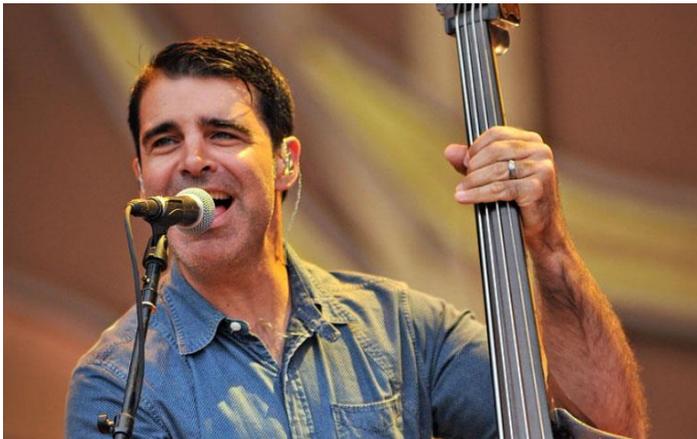
The advice for the budding artist is to look at your ability. Be honest, be vulnerable and look at your time as an investment. I think a lot of the success of The Avett Brothers’ music is the honesty and the vulnerability and the genuineness. I think if you can reveal something that’s hard to talk about or that doesn’t put you in the best light and you can do it in an honest and humble way, people, I think, every time, they’re going to ... . If you’re a young artist, you don’t have to sound like whatever is popular right now. You don’t have to be refined. That’s not important.

What will come through — and there are so many artists out there that are just an echo or an example of this — if you're just yourself and you can be comfortable doing that and be vulnerable and be genuine, somebody is going to notice that, recognize that, respect that and appreciate it.

## Epilogue

Through the words of Bob Crawford, we get to experience what it is like to live with an open heart and to experience and embrace what is happening in each moment of life. He also shows us how to launch ourselves into life's opportunities to the fullest. Lessons we can glean from our conversation with Bob include:

- **Know your role.** There is a time to stay back and let others lead and a time to understand when it's appropriate to insert yourself into the decision-making process.
- **Gain perspective.** It's easy lose sight of the forest for the trees. When you hit barriers, stressors or setbacks, pivot your perspective to see what is really going on in the moment as a way to move out of the rut.
- **Actions speak louder than words.** You get support from others by demonstrating your commitment, by working hard, and by being willing to do the heavy lifting. Trust is built through reliable, observable, repeated actions.
- **Know your impact.** People are looking to you — whether you are being an artist or being a leader (or both) — for what you say, do, represent and prioritize. Recognize the importance of what you are modeling; people are paying attention.
- **Tell the truth.** Not in an incredulous manner but with authenticity and earnestness. People appreciate transparency balanced with integrity.



### Bob Crawford

STAND-UP BASSIST, THE AVETT BROTHERS

Bob Crawford plays the upright bass, bass guitar and violin for the Grammy-nominated Americana band The Avett Brothers. He joined the band in 2001 after moving to Charlotte, NC from New Jersey to pursue work in TV and film production. Crawford recorded with Scott and Seth Avett on the band's

first full-length album, "Country Was." The band has since recorded nine more albums, won four Americana Music Awards (for Emerging Artist of the Year in 2007 and Duo/Group of the Year in 2007, 2010 and 2011) and earned three Grammy nominations, most recently for the Best Americana Album award for "True Sadness." The group was the subject of the 2016 HBO Documentary, "May It Last: A Portrait of the Avett Brothers," which also chronicles Crawford's daughter Hallie's treatment for and rehabilitation from brain cancer. Crawford and his wife Melanie, along with two other families, currently help lead the Press On Fund, an organization that raises money to discover groundbreaking cures and therapies for childhood cancers.