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# NO DEPRESSION

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## **C2C Part I: In Very Good Company; LANco at O2, London**



Country To Country (C2C) has established itself as the UK's heavyweight country music festival. It is held annually over three days at London's cavernous O2 venue. The headline acts start in the main arena late afternoon and there is no doubting the heft of the names that appear. But what makes C2C particularly interesting is the artists performing on the various peripheral venues and stages. This is where fans make the new discoveries and artists set their sights on a higher profile slot.

These are no sideshows, you won't find desperate souls plying their trade in front of a few bored people wondering what to do next. Far from it, C2C has a range of lively venues that accommodate anything from 50 to several hundred. All that I visited were packed with an enthusiastic and knowledgeable audience. LANco's set at the Town Square was a good example. C2C was the band's first UK appearance, where they played each of the three days. Before their final set I met the band to find out a bit about them and what lies behind the success of their debut album, *Hallelujah Nights*, that shot straight to #1 in Billboard's country albums chart. LANco came together five years ago, are based in Nashville and their name is an abbreviation of lead vocalist, (Brandon) Lancaster and company. The others are Chandler Baldwin (bass), Jared Hampton (keyboards), Tripp Howell (drums) and Eric Steedly (guitars). Together they make very good company.

The obvious starter question for an American band making their UK debut is how has it been over here? "If there's such a word, we've been floored. Audiences at C2C have been attentive and engaged", opened Lancaster, sounding genuinely surprised and grateful for the band's reception.

Your music has been described as very immediate, you seize the moment. Was that a conscious decision? "Good question, yes it was. When we started out we were playing to, like, seven people in a Nashville bar and they were all on their phones. I mean, their phone was more entertaining than us, a live band right in front of them! How do we compete? Energy. It is contagious, the more you make an effort and believe in it, the more the audience will too", replied Lancaster.

But energy alone doesn't make a band, so what about influences? "We are a deep box, full of many genres" admits guitarist Steedly. Keys player Hampton expanded, "I listened to Dylan, James Taylor, folk, bluegrass, Alison Krauss, Brad Paisley, Eric Church, 70's rock".

That's quite a sweep, so how do you bring all that together to define your own band? Hampton continued, "we aren't afraid to use all of these influences. We start with a country lyric and add our own thing". Lancaster took this a stage further, "past the lyrics there's a sound, it doesn't matter whether you're Alabama or Freddy Mercury. We have created a LANco sound. That's ours and nobody else's". He's right. You only have to listen to the album once to identify that LANco sound. It certainly has an anthemic (is that a word too?), feel.

All the same country is their foundation, Lanco just add a refreshing flexibility. Lancaster again, "Country is all about collaboration. Look at Johnny Cash and Bob Dylan".

In creating their sound all five paid great tribute to their producer Jay Joyce. Back to Hampton, "the sign of a great producer is someone who enhances, rather than tries to change, a band". Did you particularly want a producer to do more than package up another Nashville act? "Our roots are country but we're not just a country band. Jay understands that and lets his own influences guide him and us. There are no rules."

Though all are knocked out by the initial reaction to Hallelujah Nights Howell modestly summed up the band's ethos, "we're five dudes from country towns in America. We won't change, we can't change. We write about our experiences, our perspectives. That's all we've got". Lancaster added, "country music is us. We're not from LA or Chicago. We're five guys from Tennessee, Kentucky and Georgia".

These guys are grounded, they appreciate where they come from and what that has done for them. They know where they are now so what next? The reply was equally assured, "world domination!" rapped back Tripp, "2019 arena tour"! Aim high, guys but they are on their way. Later this year they will be on a bill with Dierks Bentley and The Brothers Osborne but according to Steedly they would be quite happy using their crossover flexibility to join others outside country, "Coldplay or the Stones maybe". Well, maybe. Meanwhile back to today, what does LANco sound like?

Their stage was tucked away behind what felt like a small village of stalls selling all manner of country apparel and accessories. I had wondered how so many people had come dressed as cowboys deep in London's docklands. But far more important than appearance was a sense of anticipation from those who knew the band or were keen to find out. That's such an encouraging sign and goes to explain the increased popularity of country music in the U.K.

The stage was almost just big enough for the kit, but that's before the band started. The energy from the start was raw, genuine and full on. As they said earlier, these guys have even together for some time and it shows. Around these musicians playing their hearts out, in shades and white T-shirt cavorted Lancaster. In this short set LANco were a rock band, soul singers and arena stompers as well as country boys.

The band seemed to share the excitement of their audience. Well selected in several ways, 'Trouble Maker' opened the set. The song from the new album (all were) came across as a statement of intent. It's in your face swagger had the band almost goading the audience into a response. They weren't disappointed.

What did come as a surprise to Lancaster was that LANco weren't playing for people completely unfamiliar with their songs. 'Long Live Tonight' had that anthem feel, 'Pick You Up' was more into pop territory, new

single 'Born to Love You' starts with Lancaster describing his small town as Eric Steedly dropped guitar licks gently into the mix that the band together built the song into a crescendo.

After that the set exploded as Lancaster took himself plus drum into the crowd on 'Singing at the Stars'. This will sound great in a stadium. 'Greatest Love Story' brought the set to a shuddering end.

What most impressed about LANco is how they blend such a wide range of influences into their own unique sound. On today's performance they won't have to wait long before they match the venues to the size of their sound. Perhaps that arena tour isn't so far off.

