

The moment is now for rising Lady Antebellum

By CHRIS TALBOTT, Associated Press Writer – Thu Jan 28, 8:29 pm ET

NASHVILLE, Tennessee – It was a party to celebrate Lady Antebellum's success, and singer Charles Kelley thought the stream of plaques and praise would never stop.

"This is getting embarrassing," Kelley joked as he prepared to pose for another picture.

He better get used to it. Lady A is the band of the moment.

Kelley, Hillary Scott and Dave Haywood proved they were buzzworthy with a platinum debut, and expectations are extremely high for their second album, out Tuesday, after a supercharged run at No. 1 for first single "Need You Now."

"'Need You Now' has opened us up to such a bigger audience just in general in country music and even other genres," Kelley said. "So we definitely feel that, and we've had a conscious effort to go in this year and create a bigger show and try to take advantage of that momentum and try to take it to that next level."

The next level is rarefied air, but Lady A seems to have the something special needed to get there. It is not often that bands get so hot this quickly, after all.

The single "I Run to You," from their self-titled debut hit No. 1 on the country charts seven months ago, and life has been on fast forward since. Lady A scored two wins at the Country Music Association Awards: best vocal group, in an upset over six-time winner Rascal Flatts, and best single. Their debut CD is still near the top of the country charts.

The trio also is up for best country performance by a duo or group with vocals and best country song at the Grammys on Sunday, and they will perform as well.

"'Need You Now' appears to have the band poised for more.

It was the only song by a group to sit at No. 1 on the country charts for five weeks in 2009 and just the third to reach that plateau in the first decade of the century, according to *Billboard*. It joined Lonestar's "I'm Already There," which was No. 1 for six weeks in 2001, and Rascal Flatts' "Bless the Broken Road," a chart-topper for five weeks in 2005.

The single also showed crossover appeal, reaching the top 10 of *Billboard's* all-genre Hot 100 with little promotion beyond country radio. Despite the success of Taylor Swift and Carrie Underwood, it can still be tough for a country act to break into the pop world. Producer Paul Worley believes, however, that Lady A has the juice.

"In terms of the rise and sort of viral popularity of this group, I would compare it to The Dixie Chicks," said Worley, who won two Grammys as that band's producer. "There was this sort of really quick and enthusiastic acceptance of the music back then, and just kind of watching it explode, it's the same kind of feeling I had with The Dixie Chicks."

Popularity leads to pressure, and the band's members are aware that everyone is watching.

They hear the dreaded words "sophomore slump" in almost every interview, and there have been dozens lately. They drop into a comical patter when asked about expectations for their second year.

"Why does everybody keep saying that?" Kelley asked.

"It's like, don't remind us," Scott said. "Everybody keeps reminding us."

Added Haywood: "Everything has come kind of quick and we all feel blessed. I do feel like we're kind of coming up on that moment, especially with a sophomore record. You either have a chance to sink or swim. So we felt like we kind of needed to do our best to pour our heart in this record and put everything we have on the line."

Worley said bands often are right to worry about the second album, but he feels Lady A only got stronger between releases. They wrote or co-wrote eight of the 11 songs on the record and relied as well on good material from outside songwriters. Worley said they made a conscious effort to explore the possibilities of the group, which features Kelley and Scott trading vocals with Haywood arranging the music.

"Second albums are problematic because it's hard to do something better than the first album, especially in a time when the artists are suddenly busier than they've ever been, and their lives are more fragmented," Worley said. "One thing I'm able to say is the second album is better than the first one and we feel that's a huge success in and of itself. The second thing is if you listen to their singing, they're better singers, they're focusing on the cohesiveness of the songs."

The band also wrote songs with improving its live show in mind. They noticed early on that if they wanted to play in front of large crowds — the kind they encountered on tour with Kenny Chesney and Keith Urban — they would have to strengthen their sound and fill the wide open spaces arenas offer.

Scott points to "Stars Tonight," a song written with Monty Powell as a tribute to fans, that will be featured when they hit the road with Tim McGraw late this year.

"It's basically saying that this is your show more than it is ours," Scott said. "If you show up and do your part, we will show up and do ours. Enjoy yourself, kick back, stand up."