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How Lady Antebellum Got Their Groove Back: 'Things Shifted from an Obligation to an Appreciation'

BY EILEEN FINAN

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Charles Kelley admits there was a little pressure when he, Hillary Scott and Dave Haywood got back together last fall to begin work on a new Lady Antebellum album after a year-long break. “We thought, ‘We can’t take this kind of time off and not just blow everybody away,’” Kelley told reporters at a recent press event in Nashville.

The trio had taken a time-out in 2015 after releasing five albums in six years, including 2010’s multi-platinum smash *Need You Now*. “We felt like our heart, creatively needed a break,” Kelley, 35, said. “And we felt like our fans needed a break from us. It was just a constant next thing. You’re on tour and then you turn around and are promoting a record. We needed to freshen up.”

During the hiatus, Kelley released a solo effort (*The Driver*), Scott put out a gospel album with her family (both releases garnered Grammy nods) and Haywood worked on music with other artists. “We all had our own space to grow as individuals,” Scott, 30, said.

The time apart “made me appreciate what we’ve created in this band,” Kelley said. “I was out doing a handful of solo shows in smaller venues and clubs and that was exciting, but it was exhausting having to reintroduce yourself. I missed [the band] a lot, Dave and Hillary and the creative process.”

By the time the trio returned to their Lady A roots, they had a renewed energy.

“For me, things shifted from an obligation to an appreciation,” Haywood, 34, said. “You get fatigue, but... now we have that perspective of ‘we get to do this,’ not ‘we had to do this.’”

The three friends gathered to write the album first in Florida and then, for a solid month, at a rented home in L.A., hoping to recapture the magic of their early days when they formed in Nashville in 2006.

“We wanted to be really intentional about carving out time to make a record,” Haywood says. “We’ve had to do it when we’ve had a lot of other plates spinning in the past and we wanted to commit the time again. We basically lived together and it felt like the early days — all of us in a house, cooking, hanging out, laughing.”

The music “poured out,” becoming the aptly named Heart Break (out June 9), which includes their first single, the funky, horn-driven “You Look Good,” co-written by the album’s producer, busbee, a guiding force behind the album.

“If you feel a fresh different sound to this record, that’s from working with busbee,” Kelley said of the producer who’s also behind breakout artist Maren Morris’ debut Hero.

“He got us out of our comfort zone. When we started, he goes, ‘Not to put down any of your other records...but I want to make a follow-up to Need You Now.’ He is a very strong, opinionated leader in the studio. He will listen to your opinions but he will fight you on stuff.” And in the vocal booth, “He’d have me do it like 10 times and I was getting pissed. And sure enough, the last take we did, I’d go back and listen and it was like, ‘OK. You’re right.’”

As a result, “there’s something about this record that gives us confidence,” Kelley said.