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Lady Antebellum Looks Back on 10 Years, Explains How Their Families Keep Them Grounded



Ten years ago this fall, Capitol Nashville launched "Love Don't Live Here Anymore," the debut single from Lady Antebellum. What memories do the trio have of that period? "We were babies, for sure," admits Charles Kelley. "I remember so many moments – Dave (Haywood) and us living in this junky old house, one that I think Keith Urban used to live in. Hillary would come over too, and we'd all write together. I remember writing that one at my brother Josh's house, and Hillary had come over that morning, and had just broken up with her boyfriend. So I said 'Let's write a song about it,' and there you go."

Haywood says that first single taught him a lot about the music video making process. "That was the first time we had shot a music video, so it took a lot longer than I thought it would. I remember thinking 'It's a three-minute song. Why does it take 24 hours?'"

Lady Antebellum and Earth,Wind & Fire (L-R) Verdine White, Charles Kelley, Hillary Scott, and Ralph Johnson perform onstage during the 2017 CMT Music Awards at the Music City Center on June 6, 2017 in Nashville, Tenn.

What advice would the band give to themselves in 2007 if they could? Hillary Scott doesn't hesitate to answer. "I would tell myself to take the advice that Martina McBride had given me – to journal everything," she lamented. "I remember when we started our first tour with her – she was the first one to take a chance on us and take us out for an arena tour – that was one of the things that she said to me that I vividly remember. I wish that I had listened, because there were so many things. Thankfully, we had a video camera with us on so much of those early days, and we can look back on the footage of that time, and it's almost like a video diary. But I wish that I had my thoughts on paper."

The band will add plenty to their memory book concerning 2017 – including the June 9 release of Heart Break, their seventh studio album. Scott says the band took their time with the album, and she loved the process. "I think we let the creative side dictate the timing of the schedule, and not the schedule dictate the creative for the first time since the beginning, which was really exciting. It also gave us three a chance to really hunker down together – we lived in a house together, we went to Florida and to southern California. We ate meals together and told stories. There was a sense of getting to live in the midst of creating."

The band took several months apart to work on different projects for a time, following 2014's 747. Kelley recorded a solo album, Scott teamed up with her family for a Grammy (and BBMA) winning inspirational project Love Remains, and Haywood sharpened his skills as a producer, working with rising country trio Post Monroe. He says that working the different projects made their focus even sharper. "I think that we came back creatively with so many ideas. We were inspired again. When you're writing all the time, it's good to just take a brain break. I just felt like the ideas started to pour out again."

The band turned to acclaimed songwriter busbee to steer the musical ship as producer of Heart Break. Kelley says he definitely pushed the CMA Award-winning trio, and that was fine with them. "He said he really liked the last few records, but he felt like we could have dug a little deeper. I think for us, the main thing was wanting to put more of our story into it. With this record, we wound up writing eleven out of the thirteen, which is the most we've ever written for a record. It was important for us to put our story into this, and that was one thing he really pushed for."

Scott echoed Kelley, saying that it was important for them to be at their absolute best at this career stage. "We need that objectivity. Can this lyric be better? I think it's always beneficial to be pushed to be better. That's not to say that we weren't pushed in albums prior, but he had a way. I think the timing, along with his personality – he's very passionate and would hold his ground on things. It was good. It was a refining process that took place. That was really important."

A crucial factor to how well they worked together was that they have done it before, says Haywood. "We really trusted him too. We've known him for a long time, and I think it's important when you're getting into such close quarters with someone – that you do trust them and their opinion. We'd written 'Our Kind of Love' with him, and had cut several songs that we had cut of his, so stepping into a room with him and taking his advice over the years was great."

Scott said that busbee's philosophy in the studio was not necessarily finding just hit songs – but ones that the band could make their own. "He said that we needed to have our finger on the pulse of what makes a Lady A song which is so awesome to have that perspective. To come into the writing room and going into the studio every day."

CMT Music Awards 2017: All the Performances Ranked From Worst to Best

The album is led by the rhythmic feel of "You Look Good," which is No. 13 on Hot Country Songs this week. From the moment they premiered the cut on the 52nd Annual Academy of Country Music Awards in April, the industry was abuzz. Kelley thinks the horn-heavy sound of the single was "something we've never tried before. I think we would have been scared to death of that, and I love the sound of that. As the genre keeps pushing and evolving, everything old becomes new again. There was a lot of horns in music like Johnny Cash, so it was fun to pull those elements and make them new again."

There are also some familiar sounds on the disc, with "Hurt" featuring Scott at her heartbreaking best. Though solid in her marriage, she says the lyrics are ones that definitely struck her emotionally. "If you pull apart the lyric on that song, it's really sad. It's one of my favorites on the record, and one of the two that we didn't write. It's just a vulnerable place to say what that lyric says. The relationship that is ending that the lyric is talking about – when you're vulnerable enough to let someone in as to how much they have hurt you, that's a open and raw place to be. I think we've all been there. I know I have a couple of times in my life. I think it will really strike a chord with a lot of people who have been through that or are going through it now. "

Of course, entering into your second decade means the same compliments that you were paying to artists that influenced you when you started out are now being said to you. Kelley chuckles: "That is wild. I remember being out on tour with people like Chesney or McGraw, and they're the reason I got into country music. I was into rock and pop, and remember getting into country music in middle school, when Tim had 'Don't Take The Girl.' It's funny to now have people like Kelsea Ballerini opening for us, and she showed us a picture of us doing a meet and greet with her at CMA Music Festival when she was just thirteen. It makes us feel pretty old, but also proud of the legacy. We are calling this our 'First Second Chapter.' Ten years into this, we want to continue doing this, and that means recognizing who we are as a band now. It's not about chasing what is happening right now. It's about being authentic to ourselves, to make sure that we are evolving musically, but also to make sure that we

don't lose sight of who we are as a band. We want people to be able to rely on us for solid and relatable music. I don't think we're ever going to push it so far as to where it doesn't feel authentic to us."

Currently on tour in the United States, the group will be going abroad before the end of the year, hitting Canada, the United Kingdom, and in a career first, South Africa. "We're going to South Africa for the very first time, which is something we've been wanting to do for years," says an excited Haywood. "When 'Need You Now' started to blow up, we heard from all over the world – from South America to Australia to Europe. We've been able to make it to Europe and Australia, but this is our first time in South Africa. I'm excited about seeing the towns. We're going to Cape Town, and to Johannesburg – taking the tour overseas is going to be really amazing. It's exciting to see how far country music has really gone right now – all through Europe, London, Dublin, and all of these great places, and the people there love country music. It's fun to be a part of that, and to be out there waving the flag for country all over the world. We're all looking forward to being out there. We're taking Kelsea and Brett with us pretty much everywhere. It's going to be a blast. We've got a horn section coming out with us this summer, so that will kind of elevate some of the old songs like 'Lookin' For A Good Time,' so musically, I think it's going to be fresh for people who have seen us before as well."

Kelley says he has the suitcases packed. "My wife already has the safari planned," he admitted. "It's going to be an adventure. We're going to take [our son] Ward over to the U.K. I don't think he's going to take the trip over to South Africa. Our career has afforded us such a cool experience in getting to travel the world and to see all these places that if it weren't for music, I know for a fact that I wouldn't have been brave enough to just do it. It's not something that is on your radar when you grow up in Georgia, so it's exciting, and to get to share this time with my wife and my son is going to be pretty cool."

Aside from joining the band on tour, family plays a big part on Heart Break, too. "[The song 'Home'] is about our home life, our families, and specifically, our spouses," affirms Scott. "There's a line in the song that says 'You're my steady through whatever.' That is what I call my husband. When things are crazy, he's my steady. When things are low, he's my steady, every single day. He might not show excitement much. He's not a high or low type person, but he's steady. And, that's what I need because I'm a high and low type person."

Kelley says their individual family lives help keep the trio balanced. "I think that with us, we travel a lot, so home is when we have our families around. It feels like home. I know it's cheesy, and is said a lot, but home is what you make it, what the heart is, whatever that thing is. But, for us, it is our family, and having that feeling. That's why we like to have them come out with us as much as possible. When they're not with us, we feel a little lost."