

(6.12.17) <http://www.soundslikenashville.com/featured/lady-antebellum-cover-story/>



Lady Antebellum: The Cover Story

Lady Antebellum talks about taking a 'Heart Break' and coming back stronger than ever.

Written By **Deborah Evans Price** | June 12 2017, 10:39 AM ET

Sometimes the best way to start a new chapter is to get back to your roots. With a fast-rising new single and a hot new tour, it's obvious the strategy is working for Lady Antebellum. After a decade of hits, 18 million units in sales and numerous accolades, Hillary Scott, Charles Kelley and Dave Haywood took a hiatus to recharge their creative batteries and pursue solo opportunities. When they began work on their sixth studio album, *Heart Break*, which dropped June 9, the seven-time Grammy winners decided to get back to basics, cut out the distractions and focus on songwriting.

"There's 11 songs that we wrote for this record," Kelley tells Sounds Like Nashville. "We wanted to tap back into our songwriting well again and not just write half of the record. We wanted to write the majority of it and make sure the fans knew that this was our story."

To accomplish that goal, the trio decided to get together and focus on writing songs the way they did when they were three young, single, aspiring singer/songwriters who would gather and spend hours crafting the songs that would launch their career. "We went down to Florida and just gave each other our undivided attention again," Haywood says. "We got back into an environment where we could just focus on writing and recording all day long. We were working with a couple different songwriters for a couple weeks and wrote 'Heart Break' and 'This City' and a handful of other songs on the record and felt like we had found a direction."

They also rekindled the creative spirit that fueled the group's early success. "I felt like we were just back in the writing zone," says Kelley. "The first writing trip in Florida we wrote nine songs in four days. So many things just started pouring out that very first time we got back to writing together down in Rosemary Beach, Fla. I felt we kind of found that writing mojo so to speak and got back in the swing of writing again."

The threesome immediately felt like they were onto something, and those instincts were confirmed when they shared some of the new songs with family. "When we were down in Florida writing, we honed in on a couple of songs off this record that we kind of built the rest of the record around. They were 'Heartbreak,' 'Big Love In A

Small Town,' 'This City' and 'Good Time To Be Alive.' We just felt like we were just capturing some songs that were really representative of where we're at right now as a band," shares Scott, who spent the hiatus recording a chart-topping faith-based album, Love Remains, with her family that earned two Grammys.

The title track got a great early reaction. "We played 'Heart Break' for our families when they came down to Florida," Scott says. "We were able to do a little bit of a listening party with them, and that was the one that really moved the meter the most. You could feel it in the room when we played that. They were like, 'Man, that really sounds like you all!' It's really fresh and different. The lyric is a play on words and kind of cleverly written, but it also really says something."

Nothing but great things came from us than having a breather, getting good family time, time to work on some other things. – Charles Kelley

The Florida retreat was so productive that they decided to continue using that approach by renting a house in Los Angeles and this time they included writer/producer busbee in the mix. "We rented a house together in the Hollywood Hills and continued to write and work with busbee," Haywood says of the California native who co-produced Maren Morris' Hero album. "We wanted to approach this and figure out a way that we could intentionally create an environment that we could just be together all throughout the day, living together in the house and kind of getting back to the first few years together as a band where we just focused on the music and just had the entire day just to write and create."

Even though they had retreated to focus on writing for the new album, they didn't totally abandon their families. "The families came in and out for sure throughout the process," says Haywood, "but the times they weren't there allowed us to really work in the studio all hours of the night into the morning. That was the freedom and the luxury that we haven't had in a long time and I think they knew we needed that as well. They knew how important this record was to us and our career. We all sat around and said we feel like we needed to get back to that focus and take a break from family responsibilities for a little bit so we could focus 100% on the songwriting, and they were totally understanding and involved. There was some diaper changing within it, but it was a lot of fun. One of the reasons we went out to California was also to just get into some sunny weather and put us in a good mood. It was really cold in Nashville around that time in the fall, so it was a way for us to kind of get out there together and mix up our process some."

The strategy worked. The album's lead single, "You Look Good" is screaming up the charts and the video has earned Lady Antebellum a nomination for a 2017 CMT Music Awards in the Group Video of the Year. With so many strong contenders, how did they decide on "You Look Good" for the first single? "I think the biggest thing was wanting to release the first single and have it be representative of how much fun we had making this record and representative of where we are as a band," says Scott. "We also wanted to make a little bit of a left turn from anything we've ever released before and the production of 'You Look Good' did that for us. We brought in some new instrumentation with the horn section and it just made for the opportunity to really have some high-energy performances of this song. It truly encapsulated how it felt making this record and I will say we asked our spouses and our team and the label and everybody who we really value their opinion from many different walks of life and this was the song that moved everybody to really be excited about what was coming next from us."

Surprisingly, "You Look Good" wasn't one of the songs they wrote during their coastal retreats. It was written by busbee, Hillary Lindsey and Ryan Hurd. "When we got back to Nashville after Florida and California, we felt like there were a couple slots missing on the record and busbee was the one who pitched us 'You Look Good,'" says Kelley. "We're really particular about those outside songs so we definitely wanted that first one to be a bit of a left turn and something that people [would] listen to and say, 'What in the world are they doing here? Horn sections?' We wanted try to push it a little bit so I think for the next single it's going to be something that feels a little more familiar from a Lady A standpoint, something that sounds a little bit similar that you would hear from us."

Though they haven't decided exactly what that next, more familiar sounding single will be, there are a lot of strong contenders. "I knew that 'Hurt' was going to be a really good song on the project, I didn't know it was going to end up being one of my favorites," Haywood says of the song penned by Jon Green, Melissa Pierce and Ben West. "It's such a special song. Once the strings and the dobro got put on it, it became such a theatrical, heart-wrenching song to me. At one point, I thought it was going to be much more stripped down and simple,

one of those nice album tracks. Now, to me, it's one of those songs that I feel could be a really big Lady Antebellum single if we ever put it out."

One of the most poignant songs on the album is the closing track, "Famous," which was written by the members of Lady A and Eric Paslay. "It's a pretty heavy song," Haywood admits. "We wrote that day with Eric in Nashville and all four of us had just randomly watched the Amy Winehouse documentary and it's a sad story. All we wanted to do is ask some questions in the song. We look at ourselves as the consumer here. As consumers, we follow these big famous artists and are intrigued by everything that they do. Do we encourage some of these things that go on in their career by following every move they make and being obsessed by watching their stardom? It presents questions about fame: What fame does to people? How it affects people? We wanted to end the record with something a little bit heavy and so that was one that we definitely want to include on the record."

When it comes to deciding which songs to record, all three members have to agree on a song for it to make the cut. "We don't like to do anything unless all three of us are super excited about it," Haywood says. "Sometimes it takes a little work. 'Hurt' went through a few different iterations of how we approached it. It was originally a male singer on the demo and we tried it that way but ended up doing it with Hillary singing lead. It felt like there was more of a vulnerability that way. So sometimes it takes a few days to kind of woodshed through trying a few songs. If somebody is really passionate about it we'll try it, but we don't cut it and put it on a record unless all three of us are losing our minds over it and feel it could be a single or a song we play every night."

With a decade under their belts, what do the members of Lady Antebellum think their fans are going to get from the songs on this new album? "When I look at this record from top to bottom, it's definitely the ups and downs of life and love and all of those things, but overall it's extremely empowering and positive," says Scott. "The message is really pro-family and pro-love, taking care of yourself and going and doing good in the world. In the midst of everything feeling a little wacky these days, I think it's really important to be reminded that we are all here right now for a reason and to do good with that."

Fans are getting a chance to hear new music as the trio hits the road on the 65-city You Look Good World Tour with special guests Kelsea Ballerini and Brett Young. The trek kicked off May 26 in Bakersfield, Ca. "Both of them are just really exciting," Scott says of their opening acts. "Their careers are really taking off. To be able to watch Kelsea have such success with her first four singles right out of the gate, it's just amazing. And selfishly I'm so excited to have another girl on the road. We've watched her grow as a performer and as an artist. She's got incredible talent, incredible stage presence, and such sweet fans who, I think, are hopefully going to really enjoy our show as well. Brett also has a lot going on and he's doing so well. He has great songs and they both sing really great live. We just love to tour with people that we really get along with and that we love what they do."

As a woman who has spent the last decade on the road, did Scott have any advice for Ballerini? "The biggest thing I've learned over the years is just make sure your heels aren't too high or too uncomfortable to where you can't perform the way you want to every night," Scott shares. "There's nothing more uncomfortable or frustrating than getting out in a pair of shoes that you haven't road tested to perform in."

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Scott will be taking her comfortable shoes all over the world this year on Lady Antebellum's You Look Good World Tour. "We are hitting six countries on three different continents on this tour," Scott says. "Once the North American leg is done in September, we'll head over to the U.K. for a couple of weeks and then we will fly straight south down to South Africa and finish up the tour. To be able to take our music to South Africa for the first time ever in our entire career, it's a bucket list moment for us."

Kelley says fans abroad are a little different in their musical tastes. "It's not dictated by radio hits because there's not any country stations over there," he says. "They find most of the music from us through videos, but also they invest in the record as a whole so their favorite song might be an album track where if you come to the States, everybody is singing along to songs from the radio. I feel like they do really like to dig into the record, which is a really cool thing. It's really an interesting and different way they consume music."

After a hiatus that saw them each explore new creative avenues, Lady Antebellum is back stronger than ever and excited about the future. “Nothing but great things came from us than having a breather, getting good family time, time to work on some other things,” says Kelley. “Our focus was what could we do to focus on our longevity as a band and be here another 10-20 years, putting out music and touring. We needed to hit a creative reset... It was the right decision as a band. We needed to build up some of those life experiences that you get all the great songs from again.”

Scott adds, “What all of us were reminded of as we made this album is that we might be a little bit older, but we’re still the same three people who walked into that house to start writing together 10 years ago, so when everything is kind of stripped away and the band is left, we’re still the three people that walked into that room.”

Their commitment to each other and to making great music remains unchanged. “This band has always been a priority even during the solo projects,” says Kelley. “We always knew that Lady Antebellum was always going to be the main focus and this is our next chapter of the band. Ten years are in the books. Now what is going to keep us and the fans engaged? That’s always going to be the music first.”