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DOWNTOWN HOEDOWN

Lady Antebellum plays to a media-savvy generation

BY BRIAN MCCOLLUM • FREE PRESS POP MUSIC WRITER

Lady Antebellum's chart-topping triumph thrills Hillary Scott for all the obvious reasons.

But the vocalist says there's more than just personal satisfaction at stake. Her trio's success also symbolizes what she thinks is an important new wrinkle in country music, with self-empowered artists leading Nashville into a golden era.

"I'm just so excited about this new wave in country music. It's all about the songwriter," Scott says. "Taylor Swift has come and just exploded. You have James Otto, who's worked so hard. There's Ashton Shepherd. We say we're songwriters first. We love to perform — that's a big part of who we are — but this is the time of the songwriter. And that's beautiful to me. There's nothing more rewarding than being part of creating a song. It's a really cool thing, and it's what people are gravitating toward. I'm really excited about the next five or 10 years of country music."

The fresh-faced Lady Antebellum — featuring Scott, Charles Kelley and Dave Haywood — is the latest entrant in a country coed sweepstakes that includes Little Big Town and Sugarland, whose telegenic guy-gal matchups scored big. But what really stands out are the songwriting chops, performance skills and ear for Nashville tradition — traits that place the trio among a growing class of artists who are doing it the organic way while nimbly straddling the worlds of country, pop and rock.

Lady Antebellum formed two years ago in Nashville, the result of a chance meeting between Scott and Kelley in a nightclub. Soon discovering their collaborative sixth sense, they began writing prodigiously, accumulating the songs that would land on their self-titled debut album for Capitol Nashville.

This isn't your mom's crossover music, the sort embodied in sparkling '90s stars such as Shania Twain. It's a new hybrid, part of a trend that took off in earnest with the Dixie Chicks: young groups writing and performing their own material, unafraid to romp in country's roots while embracing the sass and spunk of contemporary culture. The 11-track "Lady Antebellum" was co-produced by Paul Worley, who helmed the sessions for the Chicks' breakthrough records.

"We're huge fans of theirs. I'd be lying if I said we're not influenced by them," says Scott, 23, the daughter of midlevel '90s hit maker Linda Davis. "If you stay true to who you are, just write what you know, and don't try to be something you're not, people are going to recognize that. They're just looking for something real."

In a media-savvy age when young music fans are equipped with more finely tuned counterfeit detectors, trying to pull the wool over an audience's eyes isn't worth the effort, says Scott.

"It's about real people. With the Internet and MySpace and iTunes — I think with this generation in general — that's what people want. They know if it's real or fake. That's not to say there wasn't great country music 10 years ago. The great songs and artists always shine through. But on the whole, I think a lot of artists now are trying hard to be the real deal. This is a whole different time."

Scott's reaction was certainly real on the eve of the album's April 15 release: Standing in a Nashville Wal-Mart at 3 a.m., she watched as a store

staffer loaded her band's disc into the sales racks, and she broke into tears.

"There it was, under new releases. Right between James Otto and Mariah Carey," she recalls. "I was so overcome with emotion. Not only because I had worked my whole life for this, but because of how much we'd worked since we got together. These songs were our babies. I can't tell you how overwhelming this was. I just lost it."

So far, the payoff's been big. The disc has garnered upbeat reviews amid a big push from Capitol, leading to a No. 1 debut on last week's *Billboard* country chart.

Fans are already locking in to their favorites. Feedback at the Lady Antebellum Web site helped the threesome mold its set list as it travels the country on a breakneck promotional campaign that will bring the group to the Downtown Hoedown on Friday. Particularly popular are what Scott calls the group's "universal message songs" — tracks such as "Home Is Where the Heart Is" and "All We Ever Need." They're resonating with the group's base of "young girls, about my age, getting ready to leave for college or getting ready for the first big job," she says.

As Lady Antebellum crisscrosses the country to be seen and heard — "East Coast to West Coast and back over again" — the group is stockpiling new songs, logging ideas with a portable recording studio. But amid the frantic pace, Scott says, the three young musicians are making sure to savor every moment.

"We made a pact to try and process everything that's happening as much as we can, to not take it for granted. It seems like there's something new that happens every single day," she says. "There's never going to be another time like this in our career, and we're soaking it up as much as possible. We're meeting as many people and shaking as many hands as we can. It's about getting the music in people's hands."

"We sign autographs after every show. The ultimate compliment is when someone comes up to us and says, 'That song really expresses what I really feel.' And that's the beautiful thing about music. And we don't take it for granted at all."

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Lady Antebellum, from left: Charles Kelley, Hillary Scott and Dave Haywood.