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Album review: Lady Antebellum's 'Need You Now'

In today's real American South, Jello shots are just as prevalent as Jack Daniels, and a game gal like Hillary Scott is as likely to lust after a guy "in black pearl buttons, lookin' just like Springsteen" as she is a Johnny Cash type. After all, the New Jersey rocker copped his style partly from the Man in Black.

Lady Antebellum — the rising country-pop trio in which Scott shares vocal duties with the perpetually pearl-buttoned Charles Kelley and Dave Haywood, who handles background vocals and guitar — is a product of the post-Faith and Tim New South of two-career marriages and relatively guilt-free premarital hook-ups. But its impressively well-considered second album reveals a connection to the craftsmanship and flair for sordid detail that's served country artists since the heyday of George and Tammy and Dolly and Porter.

Country music always has been about the collision between contemporary life and the old ways. Lady Antebellum updates the genre's formulas in the usual manner, spicing them up with rock riffs and unapologetic lustiness. What's most interesting about "Need You Now," which already has spawned a huge hit with its title track, is the album's focus on one timeworn theme: regret. This young band is making some old-soul music, dressed up in the latest fashions.

That title song raises the album's curtain and dictates the terms. It's maybe the most romantic song ever written about a drunken booty call. Singing about the draw of an old beau on a lonely night, Scott is emotional but not too dramatic: a Carrie Bradshaw type, making do with diminished expectations. Answering her, Kelley sounds more old-fashioned. He croaks, he growls, he spits out the crow he's eating.

The song's effective arrangement — Lady A, as the trio is known, co-wrote this track and most of the others here, and co-produced the album with Paul Worley — updates the sound of heartache, as a minimalist New Age piano couplet echoes over some classic soft-rock guitar.



Beyond the title track, "Need You Now" keeps exploring the subtleties of the sadder but maybe-wiser life. "American Honey" wallows in nostalgia. "Love This Pain" is a romantic masochist's lament. "Hello World" presents a full-on midlife crisis; Kelley hams it up, though he misses the chance to do a Porter Wagoner-style recited verse.

The group's extremely solid, polished sound leaves little room for fanciful flights, but despite the slickness of the arrangements, Lady A delivers an emotional punch.

It's unlikely that Lady A intended "Need You Now" to be a concept album, but it does cohesively describe the moment in young adulthood when wild promise starts to give way to more realistic expectations. Scott has a gift for strongly expressing tentative feelings, like cautious hope on "Perfect Day" and recovered self-respect in "Ready to Love Again." Kelley is far less subtle, and his meaty gestures often threaten to overwhelm the fine material. But Lady A is making progress in its effort to balance comforting clichés with new realities.

— Ann Powers

Lady Antebellum
'Need You Now'
Capitol Nashville
★★★ (Out of four)

Photo: Dave Haywood and Hillary Scott. Credit: Axel Koester / For The Times