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Rascal Flatts Talk Past Missteps, Debut Chris Stapleton's 'Vandalized'

Trio previews return-to-form album 'Back to Us' and reflects on songs that didn't work



Seventeen years into an indisputably influential career, the three members of Rascal Flatts admit they have a few regrets. Even the most awarded country group of the last decade is bound to release a few duds.

"'Payback' sticks out to me," says bassist Jay DeMarcus, referring to the disappointing second single from their 2014 album, *Rewind*. The track, defined by its out-of-character retribution theme and a flippant vocal hook, failed to crack country radio's Top 20 – even though radio programmers said they wanted to play it.

"That was a great track, but I feel like maybe it was better suited for someone else," DeMarcus says of the song, written by Ryan Hurd, Aaron Eshuis and the Cadillac Three's Neil Mason. "It didn't do anything for us."

"That was us stretching too much," lead singer Gary LeVox agrees. "It was too far."

"'Riot' as well," guitarist Joe Don Rooney chimes in, all three shaking their heads at the follow-up single, a confusingly aggressive ballad. Now, however, with their 10th album *Back to Us*, out May 19th, the band is returning to their sweet spot. But they're still not willing to back away from country's cutting edge. Speaking frankly in an office overlooking Nashville's crane-filled skyline, the group says its natural to overcompensate.

"I think it happens with every career when you've been around 10 or 12 years," DeMarcus explains. "You start to get on cruise control a little bit, then you freak out and go, 'Oh my gosh, we've got to change some things up.' Then you go too far one way, and you have to take a deep breath and say, 'Wait a minute, people fell in love with us for distinct reasons. Let's get back to what it was people loved about us at first.'"

Much of the reason for the trio's current state of self-reflection is wrapped up in time – as in, they

finally had some to burn. After years of nonstop hustle, then recording, releasing and touring behind their first holiday album in 2016 – The Greatest Gift of All – they were able to take a breather, fix what "didn't work" on *Rewind* and elaborate on what did.

The result is 10 tracks (13 on the deluxe edition), all produced by DeMarcus in the relaxing confines of his home studio (except one bonus track, the Busbee-produced "Hands Talk"). And if you ask them, they've found that elusive mix of trendy and timeless.

Refocusing on the harmonies that put them on the map, *Back to Us* is about a 70/30 mix of classic Flatts and another stab at sounds of the moment. Squeaky-clean first single "Yours If You Want It" and the "Back to Us" title track – which could be a promise to a long-suffering lover or longtime fans – would both feel at home on their 2000 self-titled debut.

A tender piano melody leads the heartbroken "I Know You Won't" and Lauren Alaina provides an epic vocal counterpoint to the breakup ballad "Are You Happy Now." "Love What You've Done With the Place" is all warm and fuzzy as a couple set down roots in each other's lives.

Other tracks, though, are proudly enrolled in country's new school – but this time the trends are working in their favor.

As children of the Eighties, the band is thrilled to see the reemergence of that decade's pop sounds – Roland 808 drum machines, early digital synthesizers and all. They use it to great effect on tracks like "Hope You Were Lookin'," full of Springsteen-influenced whoa-ohs and programmed beats, and "Vandalized," written by Chris Stapleton and Luke Laird but enhanced by a cascading drum fill straight out of the Phil Collins playbook. A pulsating melody that resembles an early video-game theme kicks off "Kiss You While I Can," while the deluxe edition's "Roller Rink" even calls out the heady days of 1989, fusing crunchy, hair-metal guitars with a banjo hook.

"It wasn't scary," DeMarcus says about their next chapter. "It was liberating. It was so exciting for us because [Eighties pop] was such a big part of what we grew up with. ... I started out playing keys when I was 10 years old, so to see that come full circle and feel the freedom to use those old vintage synth sounds that I loved so much, it was really fun."

Staying true to their backgrounds, the guys figure it's possible to look backwards and move forward at the same time. And unlike "Payback" or "Riot," it shouldn't feel like they're chasing something they're not. Even "Dance" – one of the album's most progressive sounding tracks – tempers its electro-pop with a palm-muted mandolin melody, helping the band keep one foot in the past.

That might seem to conflict with the *Back to Us* title, but according to LeVox, it's what the band has always been about.

"One of the things we've been able to do ... is evolve with the way music has trended," he says. "It's got to be whatever year you're in. You can't go back and do 'Friends in Low Places.'"

