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Rascal Flatts happily goes 'Back' to its musical roots for new album



Sometimes you just have to take a step back in order to move forward.

That's just what contemporary country music superstars Rascal Flatts did with their 10th studio album, "Back To Us," released last month. A mix of rollicking guitar-driven, uptempo cuts and tug-at-your-heart ballads, the album is a throwback to the Rascal Flatts of old — the band that catapulted to mega success some 18 years ago. Frontman/lead vocalist Gary LeVox, bassist/vocalist Jay DeMarcus and guitarist/vocalist Joe Don Rooney deliver their signature vocals with an exciting and renewed sense of authority, packing an emotional punch that punctuates their signature sound.

Produced by DeMarcus, the album also marks an intentional return to songwriting from the trio, aided by some of Nashville's best scribes, including Chris Stapleton.

"It was an honor when the guys you work with every day trust you enough with their baby, too, which is their music and their career," DeMarcus said of his role as producer.

DeMarcus said there was much the band members wanted to say to their fans with this latest album.

"What was most important to say this time around was we're OK being Rascal Flatts," he said. "Our fans have been on this ride with us for 17 years. There's certain things they expect to hear when they listen to a Rascal Flatts album. It's important to push yourself creatively to make sure you're competitive, but I also think you can do that to the point where you alienate your longtime listeners. That's why we decided to name the

album what we did. And when you [listen to it] you'll hear some music and some vocal blends that may remind you why you fell in love with our music in the first place. It was very calculated effort to go back and revisit some of the concepts that gave us our initial success right out of the box." While some would argue the singers were struggling a bit in recent years when it came to what they wanted to achieve musically, perhaps going too far off "the Rascal Flatts road," DeMarcus agreed to an extent, but also disagreed.

"I think sometimes when you have success it can be a blessing and a curse," he said. "You start thinking we need to do something different because we've been doing this for so long, so you start chasing some trends in entertainment and radio. I think we found ourselves doing that on our last couple of records and we said let's take a deep breath and let's be us, do the kind of music that speaks to us. That being said, there's nothing we've done that I've ever been ashamed of. We've done some things in the past that weren't necessarily authentic to who we are as a band, but there are no [regrets]."

The band remains one of the most successful in country music, and success came fast and furious for the trio, something that drove the band relentlessly, DeMarcus said. The pressure to produce hits and the responsibility to make meaningful music for fans was enormous.

"Yes, there was [and is] a lot of pressure, but it's mainly put on us by ourselves. We expect so much from ourselves and expect to always be better than the day before that sometimes you're competing with yourself," he said. "Every time you record a record you thank the Lord above [especially when] you've had the hits like "[Bless the] Broken Road,' "What Hurts the Most,' 'Prayin' for Daylight.' When you get a sizable catalog you start competing with yourself. You start telling yourself we have to write better songs, record better material. It's healthy pressure in a way. It keeps the machine going."

The new album also marks the return to a more collaborative songwriting process for the band, with six of the songs (on the deluxe edition) attributed in part to the various members.

"Whatever time constraints we had, the lack of being together, we didn't write as much on the last couple of albums," DeMarcus said. "So we made a conscious effort to write more for this album. That, coupled with the fact that we got our hands on some fantastic songs from the best songwriters in town, I feel like it was a great recipe for the new project. ... I think we still have a lot left to say and we still like the process of being in the studio together and making the music. It's not easy being together for 17 or 18 years and keep the fire burning and also keep the drive alive. It was a labor of love for us and we were so much on the same page musically with what we wanted to say and do. I felt like we went back to the first couple of records and rediscovered our love for what we are doing."

