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## Makin' Tracks: Lady Antebellum Recaptures a Vintage Sound with 'What If I Never Get Over You'



When **Lady Antebellum** signed a new recording deal with Big Machine Label Group's BMLG Records, label president **Jimmy Harnen** ran the trio through a brainstorming exercise designed to focus on its strengths.

Harnen asked the act to name the three songs that best identify it, and the group answered unanimously: "Need You Now," "I Run to You" and "American Honey."

"Those just feel like the three that provide such depth and richness in the lyrics and musicality," guitarist **Dave Haywood** notes. "And he said, 'Let's chase after that. Why can't we go after that again?' So there's been kind of this subconscious thing happening where I think we've been figuring out a way to kind of turn home and return a little bit to that sound."



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Lady Antebellum Returns With Poignant New Song 'What If I Never Get Over You': Watch

Their BMLG debut -- "What If I Never Get Over You," released to country radio via PlayMPE on May 17 -- does exactly that. With **Charles Kelley** and **Hillary Scott** trading lead voices, its pulsing

foundation echoes the heartbeats of “Need You Now” and “I Run to You,” songs that embody the drive in much of **Tom Petty’s** work and **John Waite’s** “Missing You.”

“It’s kind of four on the floor,” says Haywood. “There’s something about that groove that we have always just been drawn toward.”

The new single came from singer-songwriter **Ryan Hurd** (“To a T,” “Sunrise, Sunburn, Sunset”), who also penned Lady A’s “You Look Good.” The original idea, “If I Never Get Over You,” got a strong positive reaction when he introduced it on Oct. 4, 2018, to his co-writers -- **Sam Ellis** (“More Hearts Than Mine”), **Laura Veltz** (“Speechless,” “I Could Use a Love Song”) and songwriter-producer **Jon Green** (**Lucie Silvas**, **James Bay**) -- at Universal Music Publishing Nashville.

“All of us jumped on it like ants on a pile of watermelon,” says Veltz. “We were just ready to pounce because the idea was so cool.”

Not that the idea remained intact. Hurd originally envisioned the concept as a portrait of perpetual, never-ending heartbreak were he to separate from his wife, **Maren Morris**. Veltz changed the trajectory by grafting the word “what” onto the front end of the hook: “What If I Never Get Over You.”

“It’s a complete sentence that ends as a question,” observes Veltz. “There’s no conclusion, and I really liked that. It’s exactly that feeling. You don’t have an answer. You just kind of muse on the pain.”

Green quickly found an ascendant chorus melody, and the lyric began to take shape with the first verse establishing a heartbreak that comes in waves. The chorus ponders whether time might not heal all wounds, and the second verse imagines a future where the protagonist has a new partner, but remains haunted by the ex.

Where most country songs use some visual images to convey the plot, this one is all feelings and esoteric nouns, such as “memory,” “closure” and “that last goodbye.”

“In country music specifically, we’re so good at painting a picture,” says Hurd. “This song is very emotive. It’s almost like the way that people write pop songs, lyrically.”

Hurd did the heavy lifting on the bridge, developing a series of what-if questions, topped by a jilted lover’s purgatory: What if this lasts forever and ever and ever? The singer insists he’s working on his recovery -- “I’m trying” -- then breaks into the third chorus, introducing new phrases that emphasize his biggest fear: “What if your love was my one and only shot?”

“There was a chord change, to a 3-minor, that we all kept leaning toward while we were writing, but it felt a little too dramatic for the first half of the chorus,” says Ellis. “So we decided to write another section around it with the 3-minor and a few more chord adjustments. That, coupled with the lyric change, really kept the ears interested. The section was originally in the second and third chorus but was ultimately used only in the third chorus, which I thought was a brilliant arrangement call by [producer] **Dann Huff**.”

Ellis oversaw the demo, which Green originally sang. But Hurd took a swipe, too, and his rendition won out. Curiously, he was the last to fully understand the song’s dual meaning: The breakup is presented as an intentional uncoupling, though the lyrics are elastic enough to reflect a death.

“For me personally, it took a day or so to feel and understand the other dimensions the song had,” says Ellis. “But when I played the work tape for my wife, she instantly heard and felt the mortality perspective. That’s where I go now when I hear the song.”

“It is about grief,” affirms Hurd, who didn’t fully recognize that until he played it for his mother and she related it to the death of Hurd’s brother. “I don’t think people use that word when they’re talking about the death of a relationship a lot. And I think that’s truly what that is: It’s saying goodbye to part of your life.”

Though it was written for a solo male, BMLG senior vp A&R **Allison Jones** thought “What If I Never Get Over You” suited Lady A, and the band worked on it with Huff (**Brett Young, Brantley Gilbert**), who had talked with the group off and on for roughly a decade about teaming on a project.

“I just always have loved the tension when Charles and Hillary do duets and they’re singing back and forth because of the incredible difference and uniqueness in both of their voices,” says Huff. “Charles has this grit and this hardcore soul-type thing, and then there’s the purity in Hillary’s voice and her delivery. We talked a lot about trying to incorporate that more, even in places where we might not even think that it fits.”

Turning it into a male/female duet required only a few word changes in verse two before Lady A recorded it at Starstruck Recording Studios on March 4. Drummer **Aaron Sterling** and bassist **Jimmie Lee Sloas** set the pulsing foundation, keyboardist **Charlie Judge** layered three additional eighth-note tracks, and Huff, Haywood, **Derek Wells** and **Ilya Toshinsky** folded in more throbbing guitar parts, with Huff chipping in a slide guitar solo.

“There’s a very **Fleetwood Mac**-esque or kind of a **Lindsey [Buckingham]** sound template to the chorus underneath all that electric stuff,” notes Huff. “It’s like two different mandolins. There’s a Resonator guitar and three acoustics doing that. This is like old-school record-making to get those sounds.”



Lady A debuted it live four days later in Dublin during the C2C Festival, and they spent roughly a week perfecting vocals at Huff’s house when they returned to the United States.

“You start off with Charles taking the melody, and you kind of think it’ll be just something that you hear from his perspective,” says Haywood. “Then that entrance of Hillary is one of my favorite parts in the song, because it kind of gives you those chill bumps. We get to hear from her perspective of how she’s feeling after the breakup, too.”

“What If I Never Get Over You” made an instant connection, debuting at No. 14 on the Hot Country Songs chart, where it remains at No. 17 in its seventh charted week. It rises to No. 25 in its eighth week on the radio-driven Country Airplay list as listeners reconnect with the vintage Lady Antebellum sound.

“If you were to whiteboard it, it kind of checked everything we were thinking that we wanted to say in a first statement,” reflects Haywood. “This is kind of the core of Lady A, and this is what I feel like we’ve cut our teeth on. It’s kind of ‘dance with who brought you.’”