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Lady Antebellum Explores The Bittersweet Sense Of Purpose In 'Leaving'

Lady Antebellum vocalist Hillary Scott calls during a ride to the Nashville airport as the band heads to Las Vegas for a show, then to Los Angeles to tape an episode of NBC's Songland. "I literally just kissed my babies bye," she says. Scott has experienced this difficult scenario often, separated from family for days and weeks at a time as she travels to sing for fans in faraway cities. But she also has seen it from the kids' perspective. Her parents, recording artist Linda Davis and guitarist-entrepreneur Lang Scott, toured for years as members of Reba McEntire's musical entourage. The familiarity of that scene is a big reason Lady A took on its new single, "What I'm Leaving For."

"I was driving home and got this email from Charles [Kelley], and it was just like, 'Hey, listen to this,'" recalls Scott. "I basically burst into tears and had to pull over because it's just so autobiographical."

Released by BMLG to country radio via PlayMPE on Feb. 2, "What I'm Leaving For" does indeed tell a story that fits her life. The first verse establishes a home with at least one young child and another on the way, and an anticipatory pre-chorus finds the singer with her bags packed, ready to hit the road. The second verse pinpoints the singer as a musician, and the chorus underscores the bittersweet truth: Mom struggles every time she has to leave home, but she — and the family — know that it's one of the ways she's supporting the husband and children she loves. "There's two narratives there," says songwriter Laura Veltz ("The Bones," "Speechless"). "It's not just about keeping the roof over someone's head. It's about your calling, whether it's a military family or a musician or even a woman postpartum that really is meant to go back to work, which I can really relate to. I love both narratives, the fact that it's about taking care of your family, but it's also about taking care of your purpose."

Veltz developed the title and the theme from her own life: She was playing frequent corporate retreats and conferences on top of a busy songwriting schedule. The money was good, but it came with a personal cost. "I was in my kitchen with my husband just talking over, 'What is this worth? I'm leaving the family again. I'm leaving the kids,'" she recalls. "My question was fiscal. I was like, 'What am I leaving for? It better be good because I'm not going to leave my kids unless it's substantial.'" Veltz brought that concept to a songwriting session at Universal Music

Publishing Group Nashville on March 12, 2019, with Sam Ellis ("More Hearts Than Mine," "What If I Never Get Over You") and Los Angeles-based Micah Premnath, who has penned material for Selena Gomez and The Wombats. As they considered the emotions in the situation, Ellis toyed with a lilting acoustic guitar intro, and he started into the opening lines, weaving a lyrical picture of kids' toys on the lawn and family vacation plans across a lightly syncopated melody.

“There was something sort of trancey about those intervals and that phrasing and melody,” he says. “It’s ultimately bittersweet. It’s hopeful, but yet it’s kind of a heartbreaking, melancholy sort of feeling.” The chorus kept the same basic feel, but they were able to differentiate it from the verse by elevating the melody’s tonal center a hair and by settling into more conventional phrasing. And by the end of that stanza, the melody cycles back down to its original base as the plot finds some unity in the dilemma of separation: “Every time I’m walking out that door/You know what I’m leaving for.”

The second verse tackled the job on the road, hinting at the satisfaction of life onstage in the first four lines before taking a slight departure. The melody ascends in subtle anticipation in line five as the singer considers “that last turn home,” the moment when reunion is just a few miles away. It’s an important part of that verse, underscoring a feeling that anyone who has left home for a bit would relate to, regardless of their occupation. “It has to do with everybody, even though the second verse is kind of specific to like a road-dog life,” says Ellis. “It just has this sort of universal heart thing that I think we fortunately were able to tap on. It’s about the life you’re leaving behind and the ownership you have over that and the responsibility.”

They brought a slightly revised version of the pre-chorus back out as a bridge for “What I’m Leaving For,” and Premnath sang lead for the demo. Once it fell into Kelley’s hands, Scott and Lady A bandmate Dave Haywood both gave it their approval, and it set up yet another emotional moment for Scott when they recorded it at Starstruck Studios. She had visited that building often when her parents worked with McEntire, so it brought a strong sense of familial nostalgia. But other layers of a musical relationship were present, too. Producer Dann Huff (Kane Brown, Riley Green) had played the guitar solo on “Does He Love You,” McEntire’s duet with Davis. And guitarist Derek Wells’ father, Kent Wells, played in McEntire’s road band.

“There was kind of a unity in the session,” remembers Huff. “Everybody’s listening to the lyrics, and how can you not be emotional when you hear a song like this?”

Haywood and Ilya Toshinsky built the foundational intro with acoustic guitar and Resonator guitar, respectively, and Huff overdubbed a simple slide-guitar solo later in the process. Scott took the first lead, though she had to leave the vocal booth at least once when she broke into tears. Kelley sang the second verse, a decision they made on the fly to emphasize the group dynamic.

“It’s just liquid tension in their two voices,” says Huff.

Additionally, Lady A picked out the appropriate spots to employ full three-part harmony. They used it to give the chorus extra tonal separation from the verses and to emphasize that ascendant melodic change at the “last turn home” in verse two. “We all feel that overwhelming sense of joy when we know we’re heading home and everything else just fades into the background,” says Scott. “So it felt like such a locking-arms moment for us vocally to be able to say in harmony how we all feel.”

Lady A’s first BMLG single, “What If I Never Get Over You,” reached No.1 on Country Airplay on Jan. 18. “What I’m Leaving For” became an appropriate follow-up, a song about separating from the family for work that’s likely to peak while the band is in the middle of its 40-date Ocean 2020 Tour with Jake Owen and Maddie & Tae. The emotions of the song will likely make it difficult to sing, predicts Scott, but that’s all the more reason they expect it to resonate with their fans.

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