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SONGS THAT DEFINED THE DECADE: MADDIE & TAE'S 'GIRL IN A COUNTRY SONG'

Billboard is celebrating the 2010s with essays on the 100 songs that we feel most define the decade that was -- the songs that both shaped and reflected the music and culture of the period -- with help telling their stories from some of the artists, behind-the-scenes collaborators and industry insiders involved.

When Maddie Marlow and Tae Dye sat down with songwriter Aaron Scherz on St. Patrick's Day 2014, they had no idea they'd be creating history and giving a voice to females within the country genre. The single they wrote together, "Girl In a Country Song," was a bold track that called out country radio and the men on the airwaves for painting women the exact same way: as an accessory in their truck with cut-off jeans and nothing to say.

Throughout the tune, Maddie & Tae call out contemporary hits by Florida Georgia Line, Luke Bryan, Thomas Rhett, Brantley Gilbert, Tyler Farr and Blake Shelton, all of which featured stereotypical supermodel-like women in their songs and videos. While it ruffled some feathers -- with FGL's Brian Kelley telling the *Chicago Tribune*, "I don't know one girl who doesn't want to be a girl in a country song" -- Maddie & Tae never apologized for the truth heard within their lyrics.

"There was no reason for us to apologize and we totally understood that some people were offended, but to us it wasn't for the men," Dye explains. "It was for the women. It was to empower women. It wasn't to bash men."



All writers for Big Machine Music at the time, the three collaborators considered pitching the song to other artists. But when Maddie & Tae performed it at a Tin Pan South showcase later that year, it became obvious that it was best suited for them.

"I think people wanted to hear that message, but I don't think it could have been delivered by anybody else," Scherz tells *Billboard*. "If it would've been delivered by a solo male, he would've just been seen as complaining. Even a solo female I don't think would have had the power as two girls saying that."

"Girl In a Country Song" reached No. 1 on *Billboard's* Country Airplay chart in December 2014 and went on to garner the songwriters' the esteemed "10 Songs I Wish I'd Written" award by the Nashville Songwriters Association International, voted on by their peers. It remains their highest charted song to date, with follow-up single "Fly" serving as their only other Country Airplay top 10, as label issues slowed their career momentum and held up a follow-up to 2015 debut LP *Start Here*. (The duo instead released a pair of EPs on new label Mercury Nashville in 2019.)

While "Girl" started the conversation about gender representation at country radio, such problems would persist for the decade's remainder. The following year, a radio consultant drew criticism for claiming that women shouldn't get back-to-back radio play, referring to female artists as the "tomato," or garnish, to the salad of country radio. Meanwhile, December 2018 marked the first time no women were featured in the top 20 of *Billboard's* Country Airplay chart since the chart launched in 1990.

For Maddie & Tae, though, "Girl In a Country Song" remains a timeless statement on the importance of there being diverse portrayals of women in music and entertainment.

"There's this role [women] got in these songs where we're supposed to look this certain way," Marlow says. "There's this one type of woman that's shown in every single video and it's like, 'Well, what about the petite girls? What about the curvy girls? What about girls that have their own job and aren't just trying to ride some dude's coattails?' It just wasn't representative of all women and so it was cool to get to say, 'Hey there's more to us than just looking beautiful. We run companies, too.'"