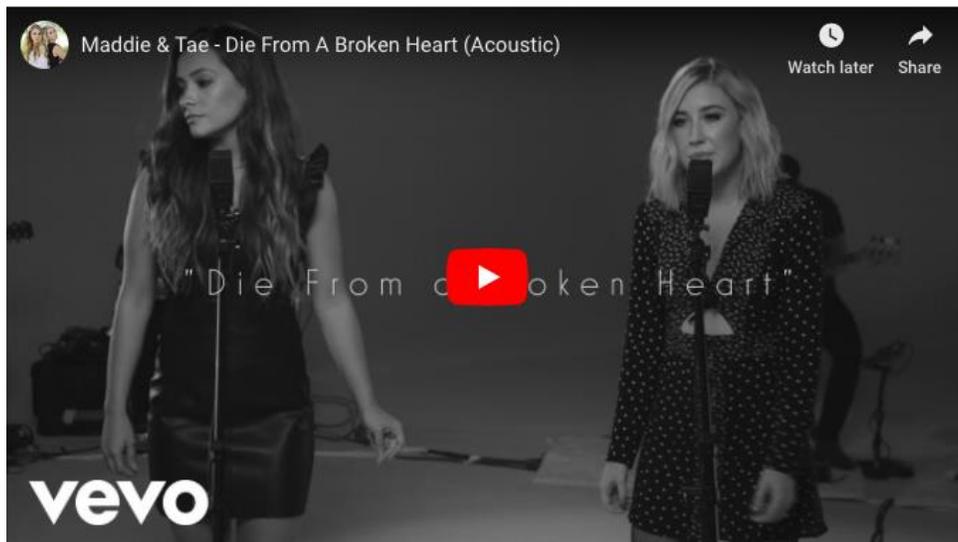


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AS NEW EP DEBUTS, MADDIE AND TAE CELEBRATE WHY CARRIE UNDERWOOD CHOSE THEM FOR HER TOUR



The two are excited about new music that's "a deeper, bigger story for us," and they're looking forward to hanging out backstage on the "Cry Pretty" tour

How happy are Maddie Marlow and Taylor Dye right now? Just ask them, and they spontaneously burst into a chorus of the church song they sang as kids: "I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart! Where? Down in my heart!"

The two bandmates, popularly known as Maddie & Tae, finish with giddy laughter. These days, they have a lot to be joyful about, whether it's their new EP on their new record label, or the upcoming single that's already riding a gust of momentum or their names on the bill of Carrie Underwood's highly anticipated Cry Pretty Tour 360.

It's quite a turn-around for two women who wondered, just two years ago, if they were country music has-beens at the tender age of 21.

"There were times where we just didn't know," Marlow, 23, tells PEOPLE, recalling the dark days after their record label folded in 2017. "I mean, it was just hard because our fans are asking like, 'Where's

new music?’ And we were like, we don’t even have a record company. Our whole world just got flipped upside down. We just kinda had to figure out how to recover. Now, having music out just makes all of those trials and all of those funky times so worth it. There’s always purpose for pain. There’s always something you can learn, and you can grow from it.”



Through all the uncertainties, both Marlow and Dye say they remained sure about one thing: They weren’t going to split up.

“We didn’t even think about it,” Dye, 23, says.

“Never even a conversation,” Marlow affirms. “It was always just like, we’re in this together. It’s us against the world, baby. We were going to make music or at least try to make music as long as we were able to.”

No doubt their harmony is just as tight in real life as it is in their music — and their vocal blend is among the most ear-catching in country today. It’s all on full display on *One Heart to Another*, their five-song EP debuting Friday that’s a prelude to what will be their second full-length album.



Marlow and Dye were just 18 years old when they released their first, *Start Here*, which featured blockbuster “[Girl in a Country Song](#).” That initial success happened so fast, Marlow says now, that “we had no idea what we were doing.”

Not so this time around, they say. The past five years have taught them bountiful life lessons, and they’ve poured them into their music. “This is a deeper, bigger story for us,” Marlow says about the EP and upcoming album, both of which feature a narrative arc of love, loss and redemption.

“In a way, to be honest, this kind of feels like this is our first record,” Dye says. “We’re way more emotionally invested.”

Among the songs on the EP and album is the weeper “[Die From a Broken Heart](#),” a Marlow-Dye co-write that will be going out to terrestrial radio on May 6 after racking up over 36 million streams.

Both women have high hopes for radio success. “A lot of people say you can’t have a ballad in the summer or you can’t have a heartbreak song from two females,” Tye says. “But it raised its hand, and to us, it already is a hit. I can tell you that every single show we play, they sing the song just as loud as they sing ‘Girl in a Country Song.’”



Underwood’s tour, which launches May 1 in Greensboro, North Carolina, will give the duo more opportunity for fan singalongs. Being tapped by Underwood “was a career changer for us,” says Marlow. “It wasn’t just a tour. It was a new confidence that a superstar believes in us.”

They were especially gratified to learn that Underwood based her decision purely on personal taste. “A lot of people look at an opener like, okay, who’s going to help me sell tickets?” Marlow says. “And she just chose based off of the music that she likes.”

“... And who she wanted to hang out with backstage!” Dye interjects.

“I know!” Marlow confirms. “She said that! You want to hang out with *us*? Wow ... cool!”



Underwood, they say, has already taken them and her other opener, [Runaway June](#), under her wing. Marlow recalls one important piece of advice Underwood has imparted in case they make a mistake onstage: “Even if you’re wrong, just own it and no one will know.”

“So we’ve been saying, ‘Wrong but strong,’ Marlow says.

Dye, especially, says she’s bonded with the fellow Oklahoman in rehearsals and advance appearances, including the recent ACM Awards show.

“We both like scary movies and we’re a little on the quieter side,” Dye says. “That’s my soul sister.”

“They’re very kindred spirits,” Marlow agrees.

As much as the duo is anticipating the tour, they’re not looking forward to long separations from their significant others. Marlow [is engaged to Jonah Font](#), who’s finishing his degree in nutrition at Middle Tennessee State, and Dye has been happily coupled with songwriter Josh Kerr for a year. Marlow has already declared Kerr a keeper (“100 billion thumbs up!”), and Dye doesn’t disagree.

“It’s nice when you love someone,” Dye says, “and you know that neither one’s going anywhere so you can kind of fight for each other. I’ve never been that secure.”



Both Marlow and Dye foresee lots of FaceTime on the road. “We won’t go longer than two-and-a-half weeks without seeing them,” Marlow says. “We just tell ourselves it’s only temporary, and it’s all for the greater good.”

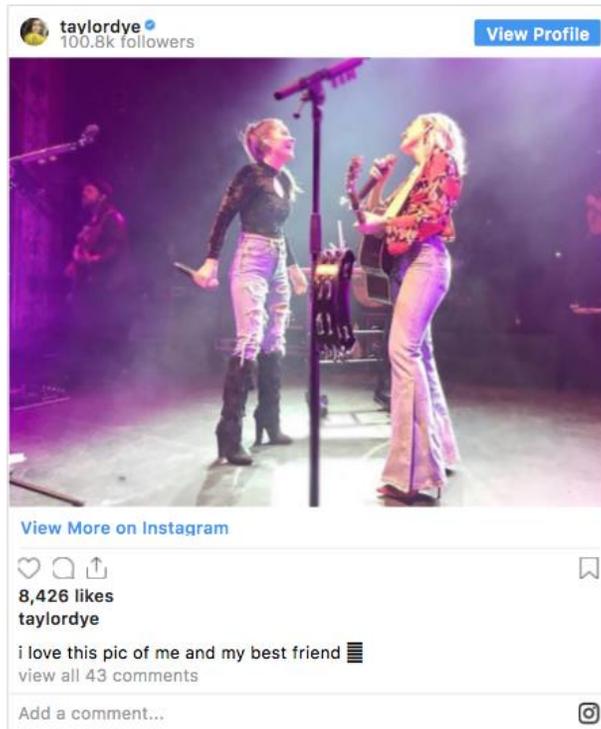
Marlow says she’s already “buttoned everything up” for her November wedding: “I’ll be getting off the tour and then getting hitched — bam!” Dye, of course, will be a bridesmaid.



Next year, the two will celebrate their 10-year “friendiversary,” though by now, both say, they feel much closer than friends.

“I feel like you’re my own blood,” Marlow tells Dye.

“I feel like that, too,” Dye tells Marlow. “I feel like we’re basically sisters.”



Does that mean they fuss at each other like sisters?

Only over one pet peeve, Marlow confides: Dye has a soft spot for food that smells.

“I love pork rinds!” she proclaims.

“You know what this chick does?” Marlow playfully accuses, pointing at her partner. “She eats beef jerky on the tour bus. It’s close quarters!”

“It does stink,” Dye allows with a shrug. “I love stinky snacks.”

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” Marlow tells Dye. “I love you. It’s all good.”

“This,” Dye declares of the short-lived tiff, “is as ‘sister’ as it gets.”