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## HEART-TO-HEART: A Q&A WITH MADDIE & TAE

Maddie & Tae made a splashy debut you'll never soon forget. In 2014, "Girl in a Country Song" struck right when conversation was ramping up around "bro-country" and the portrayal of women in modern country music. "How in the world did it go so wrong?" they contend on the chorus.

Five years later, that [question remains](#), but Maddie & Tae's statement-making chart-topper made it quite clear they were not about to back down. "Girl" led into the duo's debut album, *Start Here*, for Big Machine's Dot Records, and three more singles followed, including the Top 10 finisher "Fly."

Dot shuttered in early 2017, and Maddie Marlow and Taylor Dye were left treading water. They were later scooped up by Mercury Nashville, under Universal Music Group, and within four or five months, they were hard at work on their sophomore effort. It was during dark, uncertain times the singer-songwriters dug deep to craft some of their best work to-date.

This year, Maddie & Tae have issued the first two parts of what will culminate in a new album, expected in-full next year. Two EPs, *One Heart to Another* and *Everywhere I'm Goin'*, are drenched in raw, vulnerable emotion that only comes from enduring the worst. From "Die from a Broken Heart," which has now collected 97 million global streams, to "Ain't There Yet," they allow themselves to feel every emotion, deeply and unapologetically.

Along with producers Derek Wells and Jimmy Robbins, the country duo are taking their fans on quite an emotional journey: from love to loss to redemption. The next and final chapter promises to be well worth the wait.

*American Songwriter* hopped on a phone call with the duo early Friday afternoon. Marlow and Dye talked with us about honing their songwriting craft, the liberation in signing with UMG and opening for Carrie Underwood's Cry Pretty 360 Tour.



**It must be quite gratifying to see “Die from a Broken Heart” connecting on such a massive scale.**

**Tae:** This is just insane. We wrote the song from such a personal place. It was one of those songs we needed to write for ourselves to get through struggles we were going through at the time. When we wrote it, I had just gotten out of a three-year relationship. I was two-weeks fresh. We were both also going through the label shutdown, and we were very confused and didn’t know what the future held.

There was a lot of pain and confusion going on in our lives, professionally and personally. This song does relate to the real relationships because you call your mama and you’re exaggerating and dramatic and thinking the world is ending. But it’s any heartbreak that life throws at you – friendships, family, career. It all feels the same, and it’s all really painful.

**People have literally been known to die from a broken heart.**

**Maddie:** Whenever we wrote this song, I sent it to my mom, and she said, “You know that’s actual proven fact, right?” I had heard that it was, and then, I actually researched it. It’s true. So, in those moments, it really does feel like you’re world is just crashing down. It’s hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel, and sometimes, when you have emotional pain, it translates, physically. That was a really tough time for Tae and I. We definitely felt all of those things.

**On one of the lyrics, you sing: “Momma, please don’t say / I’m gonna laugh about this someday.” That taps into the notion that when you deep in pain, you don’t want to hear words of encouragement, and it might not be what you need in that moment.**

**Tae:** One of the phrases Maddie and I have used a lot this year is: “Feel your feels.” [laughs] That’s exactly it. When you’re going through something like that, words of encouragement and the “too positive” aspect can come across the wrong way. Of course, people don’t mean it that way, and their intentions are good. But sometimes, you really just want to dive into those hard moments and feel what you’re feeling, even though it’s bad. Ignoring it is worse. More than that, you should encourage people to feel whatever they need to feel in order to move on.

For us, we took the time we needed to deal with everything. We went to songwriting and creating art, and that was our therapy.

### **How soon after singing with Universal were you working on the record?**

**Maddie:** We were working on a record even before that, but everything started really gelling together maybe four or five months after we signed. We were still trying to feel out the team and everyone that was assigned to our project. When Stephanie Wright [senior VP of A&R at Universal] came into the picture, we were off to the races and started writing songs without a filter.

We got into this business at 17 years old, and sometimes, when you're that young, people's opinions are a bit more influential. You are so young and green. Now, at this point in our career, we had gone through so much and seen so much so quickly, and we just wrote a record without thinking about what people were going to say or what the industry would think.

### **What was that meeting like when you presented a completed album to the label?**

**Tae:** It was completely liberating, honestly. Like Maddie said, as young writers, you can be very influenced and sometimes feel your craft is being taken away from you. Especially if it's so personal and you write about your own lives, you want to be able to do that without someone hovering over you. With the new home, and walking into a space that felt so creative and free, it really allowed Maddie and I to gain our confidence back. Our first meeting with the team was inspiring and passionate. We're so thankful to get to release music with a team that cares.

### **"One Heart to Another" flips the scorned lover musical template. You'd expected an uptempo rocker, but you allow yourself to be even more exposed with a ballad. Did this song always take that form for you?**

**Maddie:** Tae had had that title for years. She would say it in writing sessions, and for some reason, it just never took. I'm so glad that happened. We went into a session with Deric Ruttan and Jonathan Singleton, and when she said it that day with those writers, it was like "oh wait, we could spin this in a really cool way." Deric and Jonathan started shaping the whole double entendre "one heart to another" allows in the hook. It was a weird day. It fell out. That was the song that shaped this whole entire project for us. We got really honest and weren't afraid of diving into a little more risqué lyrics. That was a big confidence booster as songwriters.

### **Your song "Everywhere I'm Going" is very cinematic in the lyrics but intimate in vocal performance. What led you to weave through various states and cities?**

**Tae:** As you know, we're on the road a lot and travel basically anywhere and everywhere. The inspiration to bring states and cities into the song was the very real aspect of the song: we're gone all the time and miss our families and our homes. When you have a special person in your life, it kind of feels like they're going everywhere with you. Each place reminds you of them in some way. Maddie and I felt that in our hearts, and we wanted to portray that.

It was a really fun writing session [with Jimmy Robbins and Josh Thompson]. There were a couple different titles and phrases that we threw in trying to write that song, but we ended up just using them *in* the song. It's fun to get to do what we do and see a ton of different places.

**The sequencing of “Ain’t There Yet” and “Bathroom Floor” bookends the second EP — you climb out of the loss and find yourself empowered.**

**Maddie:** That is the message we've been trying to convey. That's why we broke this album into three parts because there's this story threaded through of love and loss and redemption and how they all co-exist together. You have to have one to have the others. “Ain’t There Yet” was one of those songs that we actually wrote from a professional heartbreak.

We were feeling our feelings, and Tae put that title out there. We thought it was a cool song because it's upbeat but also there are these really tender lyrics. I love showcasing heartache but then having a redemptive arc to follow it up with. We have to feel those things. We have to be there and experience heartache. But you don't have to stay there forever. You can grow stronger and better. We love the way we've sequenced this project, especially the second EP.

**What does “Bathroom Floor” signal for the third EP?**

**Tae:** It will have the same thread. When the full album comes out, it'll be 15 songs, and we will change the setup. It'll still start with love, and it'll go into loss and redemption, but it will definitely change the order of the songs to fit that story. I think people appreciate being able to dive into each part, individually, and when the album comes out, hopefully, it'll make more sense.

**During this process, were there specific songwriting aspects you were actively developing or growing?**

**Tae:** There was a lot of experimenting with this record, especially with harmonies. I was much more comfortable with trying anything and everything. Maddie and I have been really inspired with harmonies, especially from Johnnyswim. We love the way they sing on top of each other, but their vocals blend really nicely. It sounds like two people telling a story. We definitely dove into that a little more with this record. Sonically, we wanted to keep it a bit similar to the first record with acoustic-driven instruments, but we definitely added a lot more steel and less fiddle this go 'round. We wanted it to match the lyrics, so the songs were a bit moodier and sexier.

**You didn't write “New Dog, Old Tricks” [Emily Weisband, Laura Veltz & Jesse Frasure], but it feels very uniquely you. What drew you to this song?**

**Maddie:** So, fun story with this one. Probably about three years ago, our publisher at Big Machine Music, Mike Molinar, showed us this song. Laura Veltz is also a writer with them and one of our favorites in town. He said, “You have to hear this song Laura wrote. I think this is your thing, but it's a little too edgy right now.” At the time, we were still at Big Machine. We were starting on the second project before the label shut down, and we were so inspired by this song. We were like “Man, we wish we would have written that! How can we do our version of that?” We tried to go into writing rooms referencing that song, but nothing could beat it. We just couldn't write it ourselves.

We went into a couple pitch meetings with our head of A&R at UMG — we had never done that before because we write everything. We heard that song come up again, and we were like “Oh my god, this is a sign. We have to cut this song.” We were sold on cutting it with the first label, but I don’t know if they were. Now that the new record label believed in our edginess and knew we could pull it off, we were totally in.

**You recently wrapped an opening slot on Carrie Underwood’s Cry Pretty 360 tour. How are you feeling now that it’s over?**

**Maddie:** It feels bittersweet. We definitely had our moments of tears and wondering how time went by so fast. It really felt like it flew by. We were in rehearsal for a month or two before, and when it started in May, it was go time. We learned a lot and will definitely miss everybody. We’re excited to take everything we learned and put into our shows next year.

**What did you learn?**

**Maddie:** We learned so much. I think the biggest takeaway for us is just confidence. We have never used lifts before or done a 360 stage. We’d done the amphitheatre where it’s just one stage. We were thrown into this insane production frenzy of a show and had to figure it out.

Looking back, we learned that we can pull off something that even in the moment is a little scary. Tae and I were both a little “oh my gosh, I don’t know how we’re going to put together a show like this!” This whole experience really boosted our confidence as entertainers and as songwriters to see people connecting to our words.

**Did you gain any insight from Carrie or fellow openers Runaway June?**

**Tae:** We really did learn from watching them. It was more acting than words. For Carrie, specifically, the way she handled being a mom and being a boss — and going onstage everyday no matter what was going on in her personal life. You’d never know if she was having a bad day. She gave her all on that stage.

