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Maddie & Tae Start An Evolution With Mercury Debut, 'Friends Don't'



When Maddie & Tae launched their career nationally in 2014, they showcased a sarcastic charm and a penchant for 1990s-influenced country. So when their harmonies dot the duo's new single, "Friends Don't," the sound is identifiable while still representing a distinct step forward. "All of the singles we've done are very up and bright and floaty," says lead vocalist Maddie Marlow. But with "Friends Don't," "there was some grit and strength, and [it's] a little darker. It's E-minor, C, G and D the whole entire song. There's never a different chord. It may not be three chords and the truth, but four chords and the truth will do you well."

If listeners recognize some truth in the song, that's appropriate, since "Friends Don't" owes a debt to the real-life truth of Marlow's sister, Camy. She had some uncertainty about a relationship that

had ended, although she had started seeing the guy again on a casual basis. It was confusing — Was this guy just a friend? Was there something more going on? — and she spilled her heart out to her older sister during a phone call in fall 2017. "She was telling me these things where he took her on a date," remembers Marlow. "I was like, 'That's not really a friend date. He's spending a good deal of money on you, so he really likes you.' She was just telling me random things that he would do. I was like, 'I don't think friends do that. It's not a platonic relationship at this point.' " That conversation came up within a day or two when Maddie & Tae stepped into a writing appointment on Sept. 19 at the Curb/Word Music Publishing

office of songwriter Justin Ebach (“Singles You Up,” “Sleep Without You”).

Marlow was a bit under the weather, and duo partner Tae Dye had taken a red-eye back from California, where she had celebrated her 22nd birthday the previous day. They thought briefly about cancelling the appointment and might have wished they had when their first two hours in the room with Ebach and songwriter Jon Nite (“Break Up in the End,” “Boy”) produced no great ideas for a song.

“Those girls are so awesome because they know what they want to say and what they don’t,” reasons Ebach. “So that first couple hours, they were just like, ‘Nah, nah, not us.’”

Eventually, Marlow recounted the conversation about her sister’s hazy relationship, and they recognized it as a strong potential topic. But it was difficult.

“We knew we wanted to capture that emotion, but every time we tried to land on a hook or finish the chorus, it seemed too cheesy or it seemed whiny,” remembers Dye.

Dye left the room for a short break, and while she was out, Marlow mentioned how the guy in question had phoned Camy after midnight just to say hi. When Marlow made a comment about it — “Friends don’t call in the middle of the night” — Nite latched onto the phrase with a melody, and it sparked a song that they finished within an hour.

When Dye came back to the room, Marlow told her where the song was going — “It’s ‘Friends Don’t’” — and Maddie & Tae and Ebach fitted the right melody to the back half of the chorus. The group then turned its attention to the verses, which help compile a sort of list of things that friends don’t do: “They don’t cancel other plans,” “They don’t almost say I love you.” But those verses never use the word “friends” — or the “Friends don’t” title — deftly employing

the same sentence structure while avoiding repetition.

“It saves the hook till the hook is ready,” says Nite. They broke the verbal framework entirely by adding a bridge at the end, tossing out the “friends don’t” list and confronting the guy with the truth that there’s a deeper emotion at work.

“It is the moment where the flirting turns to telling it like it is,” says Nite.

Indirectly, it ties “Friends Don’t” into the tone of the #MeToo movement,

as women become more assertive in re-establishing relationship boundaries.

“It’s something that has confidence for women, but it also has

vulnerability,” says Ebach. “I think that’s part of where that bridge stems from is not just the vulnerability of complaining to a guy, but also stepping up and finally saying, ‘Hey, I want to be with you. I love you. Let’s move this forward.’ I think that’s a very new-age thing for women to stand up not just in a vulnerable, intimate situation but also in a public format.”

Ebach built a demo within 24 hours, though Maddie & Tae decided an acoustic vocal/guitar rendition would showcase the song better. They had already started to amass material for their sophomore album after signing with Universal Music Group Nashville, and when they played that version for the team, it quickly became a contender for the album’s first single. As a result, “Friends Don’t” was recorded among seven songs during two days of sessions with producers Jimmy Robbins (RaeLynn, Canaan Smith) and Derek Wells (Granger Smith, Scotty McCreery) at the end of 2017.

The goal with the album was to make it more contemporary than the first project without disturbing Maddie & Tae’s core sonic identity. They also needed to keep the arrangement simple enough that it could be replicated in concert.

“It was important to the girls to have a record that their band could play and to not be in a position where they’re running a ton of tracks in their show,” says Robbins.

They created a foundation of arpeggiated guitars and stringed instruments — what Keith Urban calls a “guitar soup” — with slide guitar and atmospheric steel adding a mysterious edge. Drummer Fred Eltringham’s cymbal crashes alternate between the right and left speakers in the chorus, providing some recorded depth that doesn’t have to be matched onstage.

“It kind of enhances the chorus,” says Robbins of that treatment. “We were pretty sparing in our parts, so it was about making each instrument kind of have its space, and I do think the drums get a lot of runway in the track.”

Marlow’s task on the final vocal was to reconnect with an emotional dynamic she hadn’t experienced personally in several years. Dye’s challenge came in harmonizing as the duo broke with its Everly Brothers-style thirds. Dye provides an echo at the end of phrases on the chorus and sings below Marlow in much of “Friends Don’t,” but vaults above her in the second verse, creating some subtle, acrobatic twists.

“The second verse is probably my favorite part of the song,” says Dye.

“You’ve been hearing me sing low for the entire song, and then I go high out of nowhere, but it sounds really neat.”

Camy was impressed. Maddie played “Friends Don’t” for her the day they wrote it, and Camy’s response was telling: “Oh, my gosh, this is my life.”

Mercury ultimately responded by releasing “Friends Don’t” to radio via PlayMPE on April 23, and it appears on the current New & Active chart. As Maddie & Tae step forward creatively, they count on others to find familiarity in it, too — in the song’s haunting four chords and in its complicated truth.

“We wanted it to sound sexy and confident and scared at the same time,” says Dye. “It’s a weird combination for a song.”