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BROOKS & DUNN DON'T HATE EACH OTHER. REALLY.

**KIX BROOKS AND RONNIE DUNN, COUNTRY MUSIC'S BIGGEST-SELLING DUO,
RECONNECT ON NEW 'REBOOT' PROJECT**



It's halfway through "The First and the Worst" benefit guitar pull at Nashville's City Winery, a charity concert in which songwriters revisit both their first and most odious compositions, and Kix Brooks, performing solo, has made yet another joke about hating Ronnie Dunn.

But the gregarious, fast-talking Brooks, one half of country music's biggest-selling duo Brooks & Dunn, may protest too much. While he and Dunn's sometimes prickly relationship has become the stuff of Music Row lore — their entire arranged marriage was a reluctant one, two struggling solo artists thrown together as B&D by music exec Tim DuBois in 1990 — the duo share an intimate, sibling-like affection, one that's on unguarded display as they discuss their new album, *Reboot*. The LP is a collection of hits like "Boot Scootin' Boogie," "Red Dirt Road" and "Believe" rerecorded with such contemporary country stars as Luke Combs, Kane Brown and Kacey Musgraves.

Seated next to one another on a couch in Dunn's ultimate man-cave barn outside of Nashville a few weeks before Brooks' appearance at the First and the Worst gig, the guys come across like Saturday-night card-playing buddies — who just happen to be the newest inductees into the Country Music Hall of Fame. They revel in retelling music-biz war stories, talk shit about the state of the industry and often interrupt the other. When they do, they apologize.

At one point, the topic turns to the possibility of recording new Brooks & Dunn material and Dunn, resting his head lazily against the back of the couch, turns to look at his partner of nearly 30 years. “Have you been writing?” he asks, perking up.

“A little bit,” Brooks says.

“I have, too,” says Dunn.

It’s a moment of true connection between the men, veering away from their Reboot talking points — the album was their manager’s idea; Kane Brown surprised them with his country voice; maybe they’ll re-create the collabs onstage — to indulge in some genuine conversation.

Dunn and Brooks don’t talk as much about songwriting, let alone collaborate, as they did when they were joined at the hip from 1990 to their split in 2010. (They reunited in 2015 for an ongoing Las Vegas residency.) “Every now and then we’ll throw a line at each other,” says Brooks, “but we haven’t really written anything together. Not to say we never would.”

But even if they did record new B&D music, neither one wants to return to playing the radio game and fulfill the multitude of promotional requests that come along with releasing a single. Dunn says the politics are even worse now than during their Nineties heyday.

“The dynamics of that particular issue have changed so much, because it’s conglomerated now. It was like, ‘You do this or you’re not played over here.’ There used to be a station or two that you’d battle, but suddenly it’s become a whole bloc,” he says. “The demands that are made on labels and artists coming along now are unbelievable.”

Brooks concurs. “At the risk of sounding like an ass, we did kind of climb Everest. Do we want to do that again? When we finished this record, the label came over with pages and pages of stuff for us to do. It was like, ‘Boys, you’re going back to work. You’re back in the army. Put your boots on.’”



Instead, the duo is happy to just revisit the past via *Reboot*. It’s a release unlike any other tribute or duets project in that it takes a decidedly youthful view of B&D’s catalog.

“I don’t think either one of us cared about cutting [the songs] with Keith and Tim and Faith and George,” Brooks says, citing country’s no-surname-necessary veterans. “Those are the obvious suspects,” Dunn adds.

So names like Musgraves, Jon Pardi and Brothers Osborne got the call, each showing up in the studio to record with Brooks & Dunn looking on. Musgraves arrived with her band and the electronic stylings she’d added to 1992’s “Neon Moon” (she shares a producer credit on the song with Reboot’s producer Dann Huff). The Osbornes came armed with TJ’s river-deep baritone and guitarist John’s penchant for noodling on “Hard Working Man.” (“We did the Brothers Osborne stoner-hippie thing,” quips Dunn.) Pardi, meanwhile, showed up adamant about not changing a single thing about “My Next Broken Heart.”

With Pardi’s own music indebted to Nineties country, Brooks and Dunn found common ground with the California native and his own struggles in a business that wants artists to conform to a specific sound.

“We were talking, and he said, ‘I have to do some things, and compromise a hair to be heard.’ I said, ‘I know the feeling, I know the feeling.’ But that’s to appease the commercial market,” says Dunn, who loves to talk about Nashville’s cyclical nature. He starts off on a long story about a digital-music summit he once attended at Skywalker Ranch opposite Jimmy Jam and Phil Ramone.

He looks at Brooks with a request: “Don’t let me get too far off track.”

“You already are,” Brooks says without a missing a beat.

Dunn laughs and carries on anyway.

It’s perhaps the truest glimpse at the duo’s dynamic — and the secret to their three-decade career.

