



Lady Antebellum returns to form with *Ocean*.
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 PHOTOS BY DOVE SHORE

What do you do when you commit to a 15-show residency in Vegas? You bring a little bit of home with you. That's exactly what Lady Antebellum—the country trio comprised of Hillary Scott, Charles Kelley, and Dave Haywood—did when they brought their “Our Kind of Vegas” show to the Flamingo Las Vegas Resort this year. Every night, they transformed Sin City into Music City with what they called their “Bluebird Cafe moment.” They invited prominent Nashville songwriters and frequent Lady A collaborators Nathan Chapman, Dave Barnes, and producer, the producer and songwriter instrumental in the band's success who passed away in September, to perform at select shows in a makeshift writer's round on stage. The evening Barnes joined them, the trio requested “On a Night Like This,” a song of his they loved. The live moment was filled with such magic they decided to cut the song for their new record. Before they knew it, their Vegas residency had become a test field for new music.

“It was a beautiful theater, kind of a controlled environment. You could be spontaneous, and the crowd was really in the palm of your hand, because it was so close and intimate,” Haywood says. “There was a lot of beauty that came out of that. We probably tried out half the album.”

That album, *Ocean*—Lady Antebellum's first for Big Machine Records—drops anchor on November 15. Awash with surprising lyrical depth and earthy sonic textures, Haywood calls the 13-track collection a “return to home” for the GRAMMY winners.

“We've had a lot of moments that have really felt like the early days,” he says. “I feel like we're getting back to the essence of Lady A.”

For Kelley, the album was a chance to make authentic music that was healing for the bandmembers—and the listeners.

“When you get more honest, you almost release a little bit of whatever it is—the shame or whatever,” he says. “It's definitely a cleansing record. Just another kind of cool reason why we called it *Ocean*.”

The raw vulnerability of the title cut—the album's closing track—became a fitting theme for the entire project.

"In the last few years of our lives—professionally and personally—there's been a lot of ups and downs, and we've had to ride some of the waves," says Scott, whose emotional vocal is featured on the song. "It just felt like a very true representation of where we've been as people. This record feels very human to me."

A lot has changed since the inception of Lady Antebellum. When the trio started making music together 13 years ago, they were all single. Scott was 20, Haywood and Kelley were 24. Now, all three are married with six children between them.

Much like their families, their passion for their art has grown through the years. Still, they remain realistic about what a career in music requires.

"Our job has great benefits and great perks, and we're very lucky to do it; but there are downsides," Haywood says, "and that's having to say about a thousand goodbyes to our family a year."

Heading into *Ocean*, Scott was equally aware of her limits. "For me, with this album, I knew I was going to write when I could and when I felt inspired, but I had to hunker down at home," she says. "Our roles as three individuals within this band, what we each bring to the table and the seasons of life we're in, all of that goes into the record. I think that's what is so beautiful about it. It's truly profound how all of these elements really make an album what it is. It's a really sweet thing."

With a six-year-old and a set of one-year-old twins at home, Scott recognized the need to prioritize time with her young daughters. "I know that there's a reason why I didn't write as much for this album, but when I did write, I feel like it counted; it mattered."

Album standout "Let It Be Love" was one such song of significance. Scott wrote it with Amy Wadge and Jordan Reynolds in her basement when the twins were only eight months old. "It's my prayer for my girls as they journey through life and just a little bit of my hope for the world," she says of the poignant ballad.

There are only two songs where Haywood, Scott and Kelley share co-writing credits. Elsewhere on *Ocean*, they each make contributions individually with outside songwriters.

"I think when we write apart from each other, those are the moments where we really dig into ourselves," Scott says, "and that's what propels us forward."

It also enables them to craft songs that are intensely personal. For instance, Kelley wrote his love story with wife Cassie into "Crazy Love," which he penned with Chapman. He also lays his personal struggles bare on "Be Patient With My Love," a courageous song he finished nearly two years ago with Barnes and Ben West.

"It's very much autobiographical for me," says Kelley. "I can be a lot to handle at times, so my wife has to put up with the ups and downs. We've just never given up."

Then there are the songs they wish they had written, like lead single "What If I Never Get Over You," a duet between Scott and Kelley reminiscent of the trio's landmark "Need You Now" days. "We love being able to tell both sides of a story, both sides of a breakup, both sides of a relationship," Haywood says. "It's a unique thing that we're able to do as a band."

"What I'm Leaving For" is another outside cut that immediately hit home for all three band members. "It's my story on both sides. I was that child the song's talking about, and now I'm that mom," says Scott, whose parents were both touring musicians. "It was important for me to sing

lead on this song as a mom of three and being the one who leaves. I think, ultimately, if you are being your truest self and doing what you feel like you're put on this earth to do and communicating that clearly

to your family, it's going to be what's best for everybody."

Communication, she adds, is key in any relationship—including the one she's in with her longtime bandmates.

"We've worked really hard to continue to communicate with respect and love and clarity, and I think it's why we've sustained the way we have," she says. "We've had some really rough seasons, and we made it through to

the other side stronger for it. I'm very proud of us. I'm very thankful for this journey, how much we've grown, and the work that we get to do. It doesn't feel like work. It feels like a gift to be able to do this."



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