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charleston

November 2016

charlestonmag.com

A Wild Ride

On the road and at home with the
Holy City's beloved roots rockers,
Shovels & Rope

\$4.95



"LIFE IS NUTS. IT'S BIRTH AND DECAY, BIRTH AND DECAY, ONE BIG CIRCLE COMING AT YOU AT SPEEDS YOU CAN'T COMPREHEND, AND YOU HAVE NO CONTROL OVER IT, SO YOU JUST SURRENDER YOURSELF TO IT AND BE GRATEFUL FOR EVERY MOMENT OF HAPPINESS YOU HAVE." (See page 104)



Tune Up: Don't be fooled by the junkyard backdrop; the musical horsepower of Cary Ann Hearst and Michael Trent is at full-throttle with their recent release, *Little Seeds*.

THIS

WILD

Written by
Stephanie Hunt

Photographs by
Leslie Ryann McKellar

Joyful

RIDE

A new album, a new baby, and a new take on some old-as-the-hillbillies rock 'n' roll truths keep Charleston's favorite musical duo, Shovels & Rope, making a grand noise



ake a kick drum rescued from a curb. Add a loud-n-sassy Mississippi chick with a dose of Nashville twang and a more subdued hard-rocker from the Colorado high country. Plus their new cutie—teething and toddling and grooving to the *Sesame Street* theme song. And, of course, their old hound, Townes Van Zandt, bless his heart. And don't forget their big hearts—big from the get-go, and now, after a humdinger of a year, bigger than ever, bigger even than their way-big sound on *Little Seeds*, their brand-new humdinger of an album.

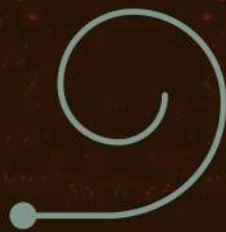
That's an abbreviated equation to sum up the status of Cary Ann Hearst and Michael Trent, the married duo otherwise known

as Shovels & Rope, Americana-slash-roots music darlings, if you're the type of person who needs a genre pegged (they wish you weren't). Oh, except for the fact that the kick drum, dubbed "Stuart the Deflated Tire Drum," had to be replaced, which is no surprise given the mega-watt kicking it endured.

From kicking to stomping to clapping to tambourine-shaking to some serious guitar-playing, not to mention full-throttle vocals, especially from the unfettered Hearst, there's no holding back when it comes to making music for Shovels & Rope. 'Tis fitting that their band name conjures back-to-basics, hardworking, have-at-it tools. These two aren't

Rope's Anchor:

Despite extensive touring, Hearst and Trent put down their roots, and their song tracks, at their John's Island home studio.



tinkering around. Their sound is muscular and scrappy. They're serious about "making something out of nothing," as their Tumblr tag line suggests. And "something" they are these days, after their 2012 release, *O' Be Joyful*, earned numerous awards and their follow-up, *Swimmin' Time*, splashed up gobs of acclaim.

Truthfully, though, despite their steadily rising stardom, including headlining the 2014 Spoleto Festival USA Finale and an encore appearance on Letterman's *Late Show* before he took his final bow, not to mention Austin City Limits, Coachella, the Grand Ole Opry, and numerous other high-profile gigs, Hearst and Trent are perhaps better known around these parts as stalwarts of the local music community, and that's just fine with them. Sure they've played the Ryman and reached the top of the roots music charts, but they haven't forgotten their real roots as veterans of Moe's Crosstown, the Pour House, Cumberlands, Theater 99, and just about any place an upstart musician could get a gig a couple of years back.

Seeds Planted

The Holy City has been home for Hearst since 1997 when the then-18-year-old came to the College of Charleston to study American history and education. She thought that teaching might be her fallback but put most of her extracurricular energy into music. Here in the Lowcountry, she found herself nostalgic for Tennessee, where she had lived since age eight when her mother and stepfather, a bluegrass mandolin player, moved from Mississippi. While other students played sports or partied, Hearst gravitated to street corners, where she spent time with folks like Sleeth "Mitch" Mitchell, whom she



All In: As young troubadours on the road with their breakout album, *O' Be Joyful*, the couple lived, toured, and made do in their humble minivan.

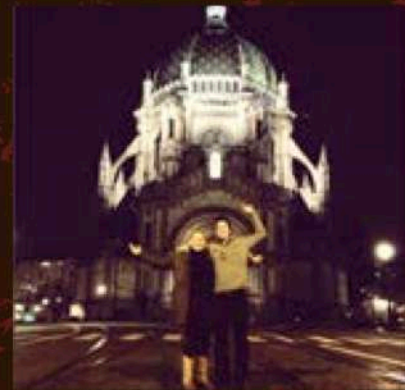
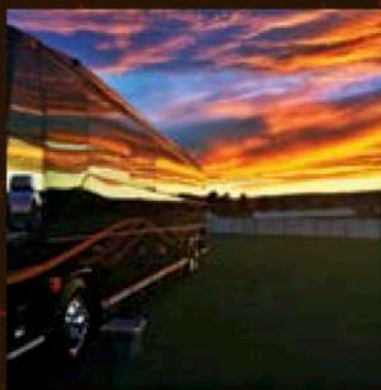
calls her "musical mentor"—a quasi-homeless banjo player with a voice like early Tom Waits whose stage was often in front of Clara's Coffee on King Street. "I studied in the school of hard knocks in Charleston," she says. "I got a degree somehow or another."

She also got a loyal, if small, following. After graduating, Hearst stayed in town, waited tables at Jestine's, and honed her ballad-iering prowess and musical range, which stretched from pirate tunes to playing classic Neil Young, Emmylou Harris, and Hank Williams covers along with some originals with her band, The Borrowed Angels. On Monday nights at Moe's, you might have heard her belt out "Charleston Blues" or "You Ain't Going Nowhere"—a false prophesy if

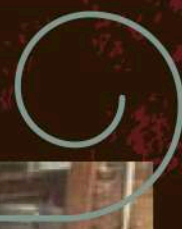


"My partnership with Michael allowed me to explore. I'd go digging in his Euro catalogue and discover bands like The Kinks. Good lord, how did I miss The Kinks?"

—Cary Ann Hearst



On the Road with @shovelsnape on Insta: Fayetteville Roots Festival, August 2016; Australian tour with Shakey Graves in 2015; "Sunset on the bus at The Gorge," Washington State, 2014; on tour in Brussels, November 2013



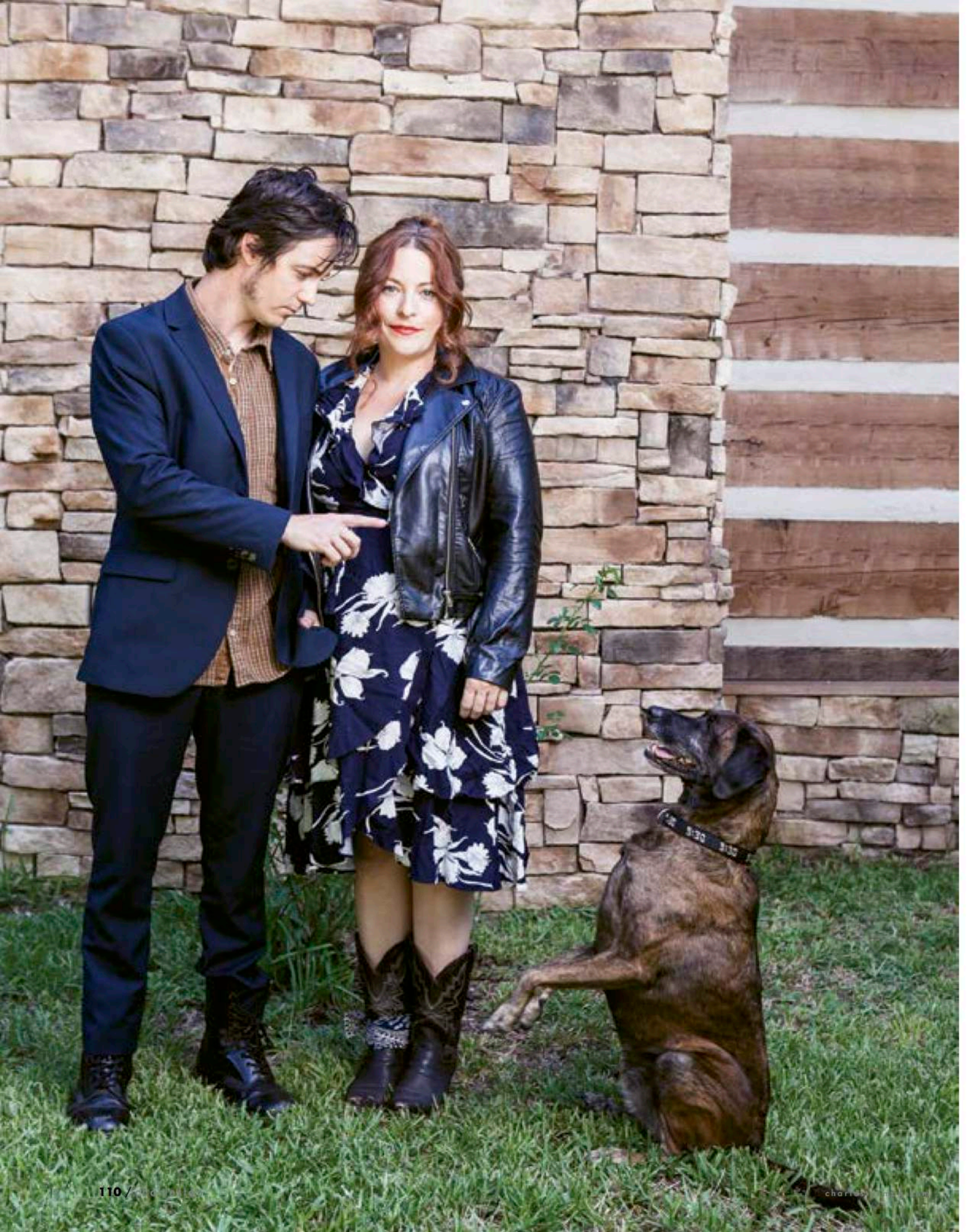
PHOTOGRAPH BY LESLIE RYANN MCKELLAR
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF SHOVELS AND ROPE FACEBOOK PAGE

Nickel Toss: The tune "Buffalo Nickel" on Little Seeds marries frantic lyrics with the more drawn-out refrain, "You and I (working around each other)," which pretty much sums up the creative partnership of a couple parenting a toddler, writing, recording, performing, and figuring out the music business, all at the same time. (Above) A mid-night in-store performance at Grimey's New and Preloved Music in Nashville, on the eve of the release of *Swimmin' Time* in 2014



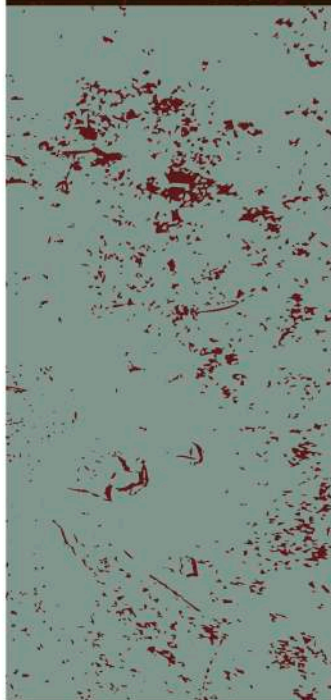
Simple gratitude at Charleston Music Hall, January 2014; onstage at Fall For Greenville, October 2014; with JD McPherson's bassist, Jimmy Sutton, at the Gorge, 2014; playing for the hometown crowd at Charleston Music Hall, January 2014

PHOTOGRAPHS (6) COURTESY OF SHOVELS AND ROPE INSTAGRAM



Sittin' Time:

Townes, the unofficial third, and faithful, member of *Shovels & Rope*, hits the road with the band, and steals the show when he can, like when he was the subject of a New Yorker "Talk of the Town" column ("A Dog's Life") in September 2013.



ever there was one.

"They may have been small gigs, but there was no doubt when you heard Cary that she was special," says longtime friend and musical collaborator Bill Carson, who has played in "countless lineups" with Hearst since 2003. "Anybody who was in the room was a believer."

About the same time, Trent landed in the Lowcountry via his indie-rock band, The Films, which had been based in Denver and then Brooklyn but was traveling the country as the opening act for Jump Little Children (JLC), the Charleston-tied baroque-alt breakout that jumped rather high for about a decade. "Charleston felt more like a community where everyone wanted to help each other out, and there was really great music everywhere we looked. So we decided to make this our home," says Trent. In 2002, The Borrowed Angels and The Films both opened for a JLC show, and not long after, Trent moved here for good, and he and Hearst eventually started dating.

"It was inevitable," says Carson, of their romance and musical compatibility. "Their talent was just so obvious, and so complementary. They're an ideal balance." Hearst being the more boisterous open book and country crooner who was itching to gain a "more aggressive voice, more fire in the belly than my Hank Williams and Patsy Cline repertoire," she says; Trent being the more reticent, introspective punk and grunge rocker who broadened her horizons. "My partnership with Michael allowed me to explore. I'd go digging in his Euro catalogue and discover

bands like The Kinks. Good lord, how did I miss The Kinks?" she laughs.

Seeds Sprouting

But even after the duo got hitched in 2009 during a nostalgia-steeped ceremony complete with a torrential thunderstorm on rural Wadmalaw Island, they each continued along on their individual solo career tracks. One day they just realized that, heck, they could streamline and make a go of it as a twofer. They'd been co-writing some songs, many of which, including "Boxcar," premiered on the 2008 release, *Shovels & Rope*, and there you have it, a band name and all. Suffice it to say, it was a smart move.

After a few years of rambling and bare-bones touring in a minivan with a mattress in the back, their largely word-of-mouth PR efforts had netted a devoted fan base and growing national exposure. When *Shovels & Rope* won both "Song of the Year" and "Emerging Artist" accolades as first-time nominees at the 2013 Americana Awards, Hearst accepted, remarking, "Our minds are blown....The mind we share has exploded."

While the accompanying fame has certainly made life busier for the couple, it hasn't otherwise changed their tune. They love nothing more than "working our craft," as Trent says, i.e. writing songs heavy on narrative—think Cormac McCarthy meets Elvis Costello—and experimenting with rhythms, from frenzied honky-tonk to full-bore rock to lonesome lyrical blues. They love being onstage, delivering shows sparked by raw energy and magnetic harmonies that



"Their talent was just so obvious, and so complementary. They're an ideal balance."

—Bill Carson, friend and musician

result in some sort of spontaneous combustion. And they love nothing more than doing every little bit of it together—the writing, the rehearsing, the recording, the traveling, the performing—even when it means driving each other crazy. (“Cary Ann has noticed Michael has no tolerance for tardiness or laziness. Cary Ann is often tardy and lazy,” Hearst confessed on their wedding website).

Getting Personal

And as often as possible, they mow the grass (Hearst) and piddle with wood working (Trent) at their John’s Island home, which is also their recording studio, and more importantly, now the crawling and walking training grounds for one-year-old Louisiana Jean, who’s got a penchant for rubber duckies and, now that she’s teething, adores the freezable Gerber Organic Puffies, both of which Mom and Dad stock up on when they’re on the road with baby Louie. “Hey, maybe we can get a Gerber endorsement,” Mama says. In a 2014 *Rolling Stone* interview, Hearst imagined what life might be like after starting a family: “We’ll have kids and start complaining about each other...the songs will be like, ‘Selfish brat whom I love more than life itself!’ or ‘You don’t help around the house!’ *Passive Aggressive Lullabies*, by Shovels & Rope.”

But never fear, parenthood has no more turned their new album, *Little Seeds*, into treacly lullaby land than it has made Hearst meek and demure. On the contrary, these songs may well be some of the duo’s strongest and loudest yet, complete with screeching feedback and hammering rhythms, and in a departure from their more fictional storytelling style on earlier

albums, lyrics that are often deeply personal.

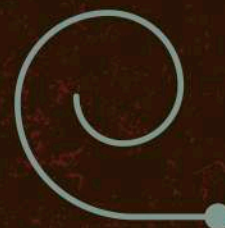
“We try to be students of the craft and write all kinds of different songs in different voices, and these songs were just coming out in a personal way,” says Trent. “I feel like the most honest thing you can do is what people will relate to the most, no matter if it seems a little bit off or it’s not necessarily pretty. But we’d be lying if we said there wasn’t a lot of real emotion going on in our house while we were recording this,” he continues, noting that his parents lived with them for a few years.

The upbeat tune “Invisible Man” imagines what it must be like to be suffering from Alzheimer’s, as Trent’s father is, with lyrics that are slightly comical and devastating at the same time. Another title, “BWYR,” was written on the night of June 17, 2015, the Mother Emanuel AME murders, and offers their somber, echoey, acoustic reflection on racism and senseless violence: “Blood was bled and tears were shed / While that sorry rag flies overhead / That blocks the light, but not the lead / That blinds the proud with pride instead / While the poor go hungry and the fat get fed.”

Yet perhaps the most moving song on the album, and one that distills the roller-coaster emotions of a year marked by the exuberance of childbirth and the heartache of loss, is the final track, “This Ride,” which was written before their dear friend and fellow musician Eric Brantley was killed, but is all the more haunting and poignant in light of his death. Brantley was a stalwart of Charleston’s tight musical community who set up his motorcycle shop in Hearst and Trent’s garage and watched after their house when they were on the road, before he was murdered last spring

Morning Song:

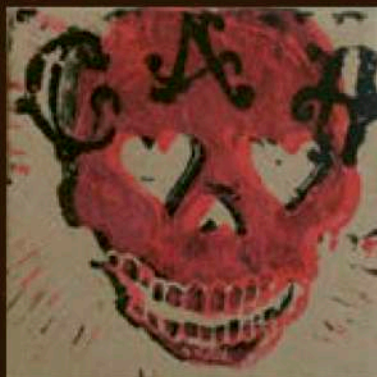
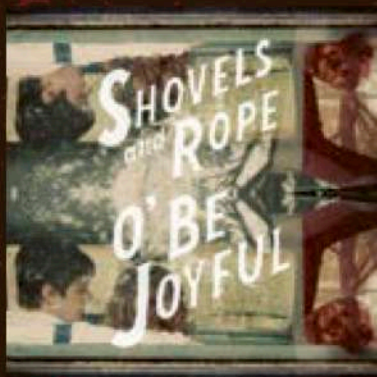
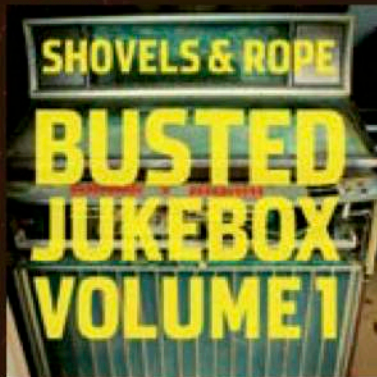
“She walked into the kitchen/where most mornings would begin...” starts the tune “Mourning Song”—one of the more somber tunes on *Little Seeds*, reflecting Hearst and Trent’s year marked by emotional highs and lows—welcoming a baby, caring for a loved one with Alzheimer’s, and losing a dear friend.



“We’d be lying if we said there wasn’t a lot of real emotion going on in our house while we were recording this.” —Michael Trent



What They've Made



A Shovels & Rope Round-Up

"It ain't what you got, it's what you make," claim the lyrics to "Birmingham," the first single from their debut album, *O' Be Joyful*, which earned distinction as the 2012 Song of the Year by American Songwriter magazine. So here's a look at what they've made, both as independent artists and as a duo.

Full-length Albums:

Cary Ann Hearst:

Dust and Bones (Cary Ann Hearst, 2006)

Lions and Lambs (Shrimp Records, 2011)

Michael Trent:

The Winner (Shrimp Records, 2010)

Hearst & Trent:

Shovels & Rope (Our House, 2008)

Shovels & Rope:

O' Be Joyful (Dualtone Music, 2012)

Swimmin' Time (Dualtone Music, 2014)

Busted Jukebox, Vol. 1 (Dualtone Music/Shrimp Records, 2015)

Little Seeds (New West Records, 2016)

Documentary/DVD:

The Ballad of Shovels and Rope, filmed and produced by The Moving Picture Boys, premiered at the 2014 Cleveland International Film Festival and won the Ground Zero Tennessee Spirit Award for best feature at the Nashville Film Festival in 2014 and Best Feature Documentary at the Port Townsend Film Festival, also in 2014.

IMAGES OF ALBUM COVERS (1-5) COURTESY OF ALL EYES MEDIA LLC. COURTESY OF SHOVELS & ROPE, & (11) BY KRISTINA VERRINGTON



Winning big at the Americana Music Awards in 2013; a stage selfie (below) with the crowd at the legendary Red Rocks Amphitheatre in 2014

outside of The Sparrow, where he tended bar. The song, accompanied only by handclapped beat (in Gullah spiritual style) is bookended by two women's voices on cell-phone recordings: Brantley's mother recounting how her son was born in the back of a police car on Rutledge Avenue, and Hearst's 83-year-old grandmother summing up a hard but beautiful life. And in between, there's "This Ride," a wild ride, so you damn well better buckle up—especially if you're barreling down a busy highway listening to a Shovels & Rope playlist.

One Big Circle

"It's the macro women's spirit of love and endurance in the face of loss," says Hearst of the two women's tales, and of hers, too, and all of ours. "The story is there's hope and it's our job to be bearers of the hope flame at all costs. Here's my Mississippi

grandmom who's buried three of her four children and still is grateful for every day she's here. Life is nuts," she adds, her voice like a sizzling sparkler in and of itself. "It's birth and decay, birth and decay, one big circle coming at you at speeds you can't comprehend, and you have absolutely no control over it, so you just surrender yourself to it and be grateful for every moment of happiness you have."

The circle seems to be swirling faster than ever now with a new record out, between performing, promoting, and parenting and being real honest-to-goodness people, which perhaps may be Hearst and Trent's tightest harmony of all. But moments of happiness are plentiful, too—both for the young trio and for their friends who have watched their former bandmates grow and mature and achieve well-deserved success. "There's not



anyone harder working or more loving and generous than the two of them," Carson says. "It couldn't have happened to more deserving people. It's still a bit surreal. I remember running into a fellow musician and saying, 'Can you believe it? I just saw Cary and Mike on TV.' It's still amazing every time it happens, and it's wonderful." C