

Southwest<sup>®</sup>  
The Magazine

# SHOVELS & ROPE

and their  
**ALL-STAR**  
FAMILY  
Band

TOWNES *van* ZANDT | LOUISIANA | *and* THE ROCK  
(The Hound Dog) | (The Toddler) | & ROLL Nanny





**On  
the road  
with  
folk-rock  
duo  
Shovels &  
Rope  
(and their  
toddler,  
hound dog,  
and blue-  
haired  
nanny).**

**By Michael J. Mooney /  
Photography by Jeff Wilson**



# It's like watching two parts of the same brain.

On stage, it's just the two of them, taking turns on the drums and guitar, somehow creating the sound of a five-piece band, both singing, sometimes harmonizing, sometimes shouting over one another. Off stage, it's not just that they finish each other's sentences. Their words flow back and forth, a single stream of thoughts building on itself.

Michael Trent and Cary Ann Hearst are perched on a black vinyl bench backstage at the Granada Theater in Dallas, leaning in so close to each other that her tan Toms slip-ons keep brushing up against his black combat boots. They're talking about the day nearly seven years ago when they decided on the name of their band: Shovels & Rope. It was the day they decided they were going to take this whole thing seriously. By then they were married and had been working on separate music careers for 10 years each. He'd landed a deal with a big label and she'd had a song featured on the show *True Blood*. The idea of throwing that all away and starting anew was terrifying. They were also worried that going into business together might ruin a marriage they'd worked hard to build.

"I feel like we—" Cary Ann begins.

"We were going down to open up for—"

Michael continues.

"For Hayes Carll, we were driving across—"

Cary Ann says, trailing off a bit, unsure of the headliner.

"No, for Roddy," he says, "and Deer Tick."

"That's it," she says.

"In Birmingham," he says. "And that's why the song is called—" In unison, they both name the song they wrote about that discussion:

"Birmingham."

Cary Ann has wavy red locks that seem to

glow in photos. She's wearing a long skirt that looks like a quilt (in a good way) and a jean jacket with a NASA patch. Michael, a few inches taller with scruffs of dark facial hair, is in black jeans and a trucker hat from a bar in Portland, Oregon. A faded stamp from the Broken Spoke is still visible on the back of his hand. That's where they were last night—their eighth anniversary—twirling and clinking bottles in one of those classic dusty dance halls on the south side of Austin. They had so much fun that they stayed up later than usual, and then struggled to sleep as the bus headed north through a powerful rolling thunderstorm. The deep rumbles of thunder and veins of lightning were cool, they agree, but they didn't get much rest and woke up groggy in a parking lot in Dallas.

After a quick radio appearance to promote tonight's show, they took their brindle hound dog, named Townes Van Zandt, and their toddler, Louisiana (they call her "Louie"), for a stroll down the tree-lined streets in the neighborhood around the venue. Then they had coffee under a shady tree, breathing in the muggy post-storm air. The winds and rain last night knocked the plastic red letters off the marquee at the Granada, the old movie house-turned-concert hall where they'll perform in a few hours, so a team from the theater spent the morning sweeping up all the broken S's and E's from the sidewalk.

Cary Ann and Michael are both in their late 30s now, the kind of

**OPPOSITE**  
Michael and Cary Ann at Broken Spoke in Austin







urban-dwelling artist do-gooders who might reside in any number of progressive neighborhoods in cities all over the country. They make *Downton Abbey* references, they have a big record collection, and, until they were gone touring so long that the snakes and coyotes came, they raised chickens behind their house in Charleston, South Carolina. She's the outgoing, natural performer with an old-timey Tennessee drawl. He's the quiet engineer, more interested in the technical arrangements and the business side of the industry.

The duo has now headlined some of the country's top venues, everywhere from the Ryman to Red Rocks to Radio City, and toured across Europe, too. They've played on *Late Show with David Letterman* (he loved them), and just about every North American outlet that covers music has gushed over them, including several rave reviews from NPR—which should give you some clue about their audience. It turns out they've been able to accomplish more together than either of them could alone.

The ballad they wrote about that important talk seven years ago won the 2013 Americana Music Association award for Song of the Year. The first lyrics they wrote became the last line of the song, words they sing together nearly every night: "On better terms since Birmingham."

**S**HE WAS BORN in Mississippi and raised in Tennessee, playing bluegrass with her family. She moved to Charleston for college, playing around town after she graduated.

He was born in Texas and grew up in Colorado. He was a quiet kid who wrote poetry he didn't want to show anyone. He had a four-track recorder in high school and repeatedly maxed out the hard drive. He and his friends started an indie-pop band, The Films, that toured the U.S. as well as Japan and Germany.

The first time they saw each other was on a Sunday night in 2002 or 2003. Cary Ann was playing with a country band at a bar called Fluids that her then-boyfriend owned. Michael's band was in Charleston to open for a popular local act.

"Charleston is a small town," Michael says. "The artist scene is—"

"Intimate," Cary Ann continues. "Our thing was the thing to do on Sunday nights." She says



## Showstoppers

**These aren't your typical performances. See a concert...**

- ... **with Willie Nelson** / Every March, Luck Reunion unfolds at the country legend's ranch, just outside of Austin, Texas. Artists perform in a barn, saloon, and church, all of which were built for the film *Red Headed Stranger*.
- ... **where stars are born** / Catch a concert in the heart of Los Angeles at one of The Hotel Café's two stages, adorned with exposed brick and funky light fixtures.
- ... **on the National Mall** / Washington, D.C.'s Sylvan Theater hosts free outdoor concerts throughout the summer as part of "Music at the Monument."
- ... **in a historic venue** / Toast the Bluebird Café's 35th anniversary by seeing a singer-songwriter at the cozy Nashville institution, which seats just 90 people.
- ... **by an up-and-comer** / Tucked away in the Atlanta suburb of Decatur, Eddie's Attic has hosted the likes of John Mayer, Sugarland, and The Civil Wars before they made it big. Grab a pre-show dinner around the corner at Iberian Pig.
- ... **at a museum** / Not only does Phoenix's Musical Instrument Museum house more than 6,500 instruments from 200 countries, it also touts a concert series with genres ranging from folk to jazz.
- ... **under the stars** / For nearly four decades, Fort Lauderdale has held its Starlight Musicals summer concert series in Holiday Park. The performances are free, but don't forget to bring lawn chairs and a picnic basket.
- ... **at a moment's notice** / Sofar Sounds takes house shows to the next level. The location isn't announced until the day before the gig, and the artists—who range from local acts to notable names like Leon Bridges—are a surprise until you show up.



all of her friends immediately noticed when Michael's band walked in.

"We were kind of glammed out a little bit," Michael says. "The tightest pants and makeup and everything."

They didn't actually meet until a few weeks later, when they were on the same lineup at the Georgia Theatre, in Athens, Georgia. They remember shaking hands.

"I'm Cary Ann."

"I'm Mike."

When Michael's band moved to Charleston not long after, Cary Ann's guitarist became Michael's roommate. Both of them were still dating other people, but not for long. "You broke up with your girlfriend because your long-distance relationship wasn't working out," she says, as they recount the story together. "And my short-distance relationship wasn't working out. So we got single and we were kind of playing music and our bands were hanging out and we started flirting with each other and I fell for Michael pretty quickly."

He had some recording equipment at his apartment and invited her over to record some tracks. He says he began to fall in love with her when he heard the music she'd been writing on her own. "I heard the way she described people and places and events and I heard compassion in her music. I think I probably fell in love with that. I liked where she was coming from as a person."

They dated on and off for a few years, breaking up when he moved to New York with his band in 2006. He moved back to Charleston in 2008, though, and asked Cary Ann if she wanted to make a record with him. "My band was still going, and her band was still going," Michael says. "We just wanted to do this. For one thing, we were sort of getting back together. We sort of used it as an excuse to get back together and write songs together and use music as a catalyst for that. So we made that with no intention of doing anything other than just making art."

They called the record they made *Shovels & Rope*. Two dirty, gritty items



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you might find lying around the house. They do very different things, but they sort of go well together.

Most of the songs on the album are about murder and death, tales inspired by history and literature and an outlaw country ethos. It was just the two of them, playing with and over and, at times, against each other, evincing a shack-rattling racket. So many of the things that have become their hallmark staples were there in those early days. Not long after finishing the record, they got married at an old vineyard in Charleston.



**M**ICHAEL'S BAND was, as he puts it, "waning," and the next year both husband and wife recorded their own solo albums. They still had day jobs—she as a waitress and he at a catering company and a chicken farm—but they played together around town for a little extra cash. They'd play a few songs from her album, a few from his, and a few from the record they'd written together.

"The first time you saw us at a bar we'd sell you three CDs for \$25," Cary Ann says. She recalls the old sales pitch: "There's definitely \$25 worth of music over these three records!"

Audiences started liking the duo more than they liked either of them individually. They took fewer catering and waitressing shifts and started playing more often, becoming a local draw. By the fall of 2010, they realized they had a decision to make. That's when they had that conversation on the way to Birmingham. Were they really a band now? Were they scrapping their solo careers, whatever success they'd scratched out? They were both used to being in charge. Could they really agree to call the shots together?

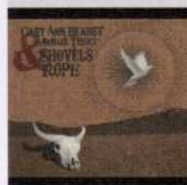
"It was a practice of letting go of ego and expectations and control," Cary Ann says. "It was this very Buddhist exercise in surrendering to the cosmos and taking a leap of faith, but also committing to do the work."

They decided they'd stick with the name they'd given that first album they recorded together and called the band Shovels & Rope. "If anybody had seen our band and liked us enough to buy that record," Cary Ann says, "we figured that would have some subconscious connection."

They say they also agreed on some ground rules. The first: Their relationship was not for sale at the merchandise table. "We were going to be super private about our marriage," Cary Ann says. "We were not going to talk about it to anybody ever."

They look at each other, then at me, a reporter who's been asking about their

## A Recorded History of Shovels & Rope



**2008**

How it all began: the one-off album that begot the marriage and, eventually, the band.



**2012**

Features the hit "Birmingham," which they played on *Late Show with David Letterman*.



**2014**

Landed at No. 21 on the *Billboard* 200; steeped in stories from the Deep South.



**2015**

Collaborated with friends to cover artists ranging from Elvis Costello to Guns N' Roses.



**2016**

Produced after the birth of their daughter; their most rock-leaning album yet.

marriage for quite some time now, and then back at each other. They laugh and shrug.

**S**OMETIMES YOUNGER couples will approach Michael and Cary Ann to say that they inspired them to form a musical duo. Michael says he tries to be polite, but he knows how hard this life is. Plenty of wife-and-husband music groups have broken up over the years. "It's not easy," he says. "Especially in the early days. There's a lot of sacrifice. There's a lot of ridiculous situations you find yourself in. A blizzard in Pittsburgh in a Wal-Mart parking lot. You have to take the dog out so he can have a [crap] and he just won't. Or opening up that night for an open mic comedy night and nobody was there. They weren't even comedians; they were like lawyers and doctors."

"That doctor was really funny though," Cary Ann says.

"He really was."

It's tough to make any money from streaming services, and not many people buy actual albums anymore. The only way to make a living as a musician is touring. So they toured ceaselessly, playing more than 200 shows a year. Because there were only two of them and they drove the old van from The Films, they made a great (read: cheap) opening act. Most contracts require that gigs are at least 100 miles apart. "We just drove in these little 100-mile radiuses," Cary Ann says, "across the South, out West, until we made curlicues all over the country."

"It was kind of romantic," Michael says. "Just us and the dog in the van."

"It was totally romantic," she says.

They've both learned over the years how to talk calmly about disagreements, and they don't fight much. When they do, it's often about her free-flowing style of play. Michael orchestrates the engineering and arrangements, meaning he

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spends weeks plotting out the various parts of songs they've written together. Cary Ann, always a bit more spontaneous, likes to be playful when they practice.

He nods when she mentions it. "Even if it doesn't have to go on stage that way," he says, "it's still like, 'Could you just try it the way I spent all this time working it out?'"

Their songs are inspired by everything from dreams to Civil War history to characters from Flannery O'Connor and Cormac McCarthy stories. They read a lot of books together, most recently *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* and *All the Light We Cannot See*. One year, as they toured, they listened to all of the Game of Thrones audiobooks. ("I kind of want that year back," Michael says.)

He often wears a Western-style shirt on stage, and she's all made up, her hair bouncing with the stomp of her boots. They stand up and switch seats depending on the song, trading instruments—between the two of them they play at least eight or nine. When they sing, they almost always sing together, one voice on top of the other. They make eye contact for much of the show, so they're constantly signaling to one another, chasing and matching each other vocally. When they get it just right, it's some sort of mesmerizing ballet.

They recorded their first serious album, *O' Be Joyful*, in the studio Michael set up in their house, with a few guest appearances recorded between gigs in their van. The more they toured, the more word spread. They'd often do a round of rock or country venues, and then return to the same cities a few months later to play more laid-back, acoustic joints.

They've continued this cycle—recording an album at home, then touring—for five years. Each tour gets a little bigger, and over the years, their name has moved up the marquee. They eventually traded their old van in for a sleek

RV. Then, when they had the baby in September 2015, they upgraded to a tour bus.

**D**URING SOUND CHECK at the Granada in Dallas, Cary Ann and Michael play parts of every song Michael has chosen for tonight's set list. A lingering cold means that Cary Ann can't quite hit some of her usual notes, so they adjust accordingly, and after a little more than an hour, they go for another walk.

Townes, the brindle hound, comes along again, but this time the baby stays with Julie, the blue-haired "rock 'n' roll Mary Poppins." Julie is one of eight other adults riding on the tour bus, all of whom chip in with caring for Louie and Townes in addition to more standard tour responsibilities. Michael says he thinks of it "like any other small mom-and-pop business, where we balance each other out with our strengths and our weaknesses and divide and conquer." To Cary Ann, life on the bus is more like a ship. "Everyone has their jobs, everything has its place, and every morning you wake up in a new town."

They'd like to have more kids soon, and they'd like to take those kids out on the road with them, too. At least until "school becomes a thing," as Michael puts it. Then there's the possibility of homeschooling, but they'll deal with that when it's time. If the kids love music, maybe they'll join the band.

"That's my dream," Cary Ann says. "It's kind of the point of this band."

She's quick to add that they'll support their kids' dreams no matter what, like their parents have with them. "If you're into music, we'll get behind you and help you," she says, imagining the conversation with her kids—wherever it might take place. "But if you're trying to be a sailor or something, if that's what your passion is, we'll invest in your sails."

As they walk block to block with the dog, they talk about growing older, about the new worry with cholesterol numbers, about Michael's father's gut-wrenching battle with Alzheimer's. They talk about trying to secure themselves financially in case there's a time when it's not feasible for them to be on the road so much. Then Townes squats, and Michael produces a small bag and retrieves it.

Soon their team—which handles everything from merchandise to the sound board to the tour management—gathers backstage. Michael and Cary Ann put the baby to bed on the bus. Cary Ann puts on her makeup, and they both get dressed for the show. Then they "kiss the baby," a nightly ritual where everyone passes around a bottle of tequila or whiskey and takes a shot. Then it's show time.

The theater is packed. It's mostly people in their 30s, professionals enjoying a weeknight out. The lines at the bars are long. When Cary Ann and Michael take the stage, there's a prolonged roar. Vintage film clips are projected onto rugged planks of wood behind them as they play, rotating through acoustic and electric guitars, a drum kit, a mandolin, a shaker, a keyboard, a harmonica. There's some polite banter, enough for everyone to hear her sugary accent, and they play a mix of haunting ballads and foot-stomping sing-alongs and heavy, almost grungy rock. People near the stage can see the couple looking at each other, but even in the very back you can feel the energy they're generating together.

When the show ends, they unwind with a nightcap on the bus and try for sleep. The last of the gear is loaded around 2 a.m., and they head off into the night. Tomorrow they'll wake up in a new city hundreds of miles away.

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