



US THE DUO *Just Love*

With Us The Duo's new album *Just Love*, recorded after two years of explosive social media fame, widespread press and TV attention, national touring, a major-label album, and recent self-declared independence, the husband-and-wife musical team of Michael and Carissa Alvarado find themselves — to borrow a lyric from one of their songs — right where they should be.

Just Love, the first album by the Southern California-based singing/songwriting couple since 2014's *No Matter Where You Are*, was recorded at The Smoakstack Studio in Nashville with co-producer Nathan Thomas. *Just Love* features 11 new original songs by the Alvarados. Their crisp, affecting pop delivers its intimate emotion in the same way that Us The Duo has always communicated with their fans: directly, and from the heart.

"That's all we really know how to do," Carissa says. "We've written so many songs about our relationship, and about love. On this album we write about the darker side of us, and things we've dealt with in the past. We hope that people feel the heart in our music."

The new release reflects the Alvarados' roots as independent artists who grew an immense following by addressing their listeners on social media. Posting a series of six-second musical clips on the video-sharing site Vine to promote their self-produced debut album, the couple quickly amassed a rabid fan base that now totals 10 million devoted followers. Their Internet fame led to conversations with Universal Republic Records that climaxed with the signing of a record deal.

In rapid succession, their song "No Matter Where You Are" — a musical rendering of their wedding vows — was used in the 2014 animated feature *The Book of Life*; Oprah Winfrey, an avowed fan of the song and Us The Duo, took them on her 2014 "The Life You Want Weekend" national tour; Universal Republic released a full-length album; and the Alvarados received enthusiastic coverage in such press outlets as *People*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Billboard*, *Variety*, and the *Hollywood Reporter*.

However, even as Us The Duo received a high-profile contract and the kind of attention every performer dreams of, they found their professional situation was pulling them away from their creative ideals and their musical origins, and they decided to exit their label deal.

Michael says, "When you're young in music, you hear, 'Are you signed yet? Do you want to be signed to a major label?'" That had always been ingrained in us as the ultimate goal, and we finally achieved that. And then we found that behind this curtain it was a little different than what we expected. For some artists, it's a great thing, and for others it's not a great fit. Having sprouted from social media, it wasn't a great fit for us, but it took us two years to realize that. We kept trying, and it just didn't work. The frustration of doing that every single day for two years took a toll on us."

Carissa adds, “We don’t have any anger or hatred towards the label, because they did help us a lot. We met a lot of wonderful people there, and a lot of people that we learned from. But it came down to the fact that it wasn’t right for us, in this moment. It was liberating after we left, because we really could go back to what we do, and go back to putting out music that we wanted to put out. And I feel like the fans and the listeners can see that. When we put out our new single, ‘(Stop) Just Love,’ everyone said, ‘*There* you guys are! This is what we’ve been waiting for.’ It’s nice to be able to be ourselves.”

In bold contrast to most contemporary pop albums, which are made using platoons of musicians and songwriters and employing a multitude of studio techniques, *Just Love* was created by the Alvarados with a small team of players, and the collection features the writing of the Alvarados (who collaborated with producer Thomas on five numbers). It was cut live with only minimal overdubs.

Michael says, “We had this vision of getting into the room and creating something in the moment — everyone putting their heads together and seeing what would come out. The whole vibe was a full band, like the old days of Muscle Shoals — how they’d all record in one room and vibe off of the feeling that was created.”

He continues, “I said to Nathan, ‘I don’t want any synth on a song. I don’t want any samples or patches of anything that’s not real instruments.’ He said, ‘Are you sure?’ I said, ‘We’re going to keep this organic.’ It makes things sparse – there’s space. But that in itself can be beautiful. We were listening back to these songs after we performed them in the studio, and it was, ‘Add something here, add something there.’ And Carissa and I said, ‘No, guys, let’s hold back. Let the song *breathe*.’”

The result is a soulful album that reflects the couple’s musical bedrock – the soul of Earth, Wind & Fire, Michael Jackson, and Prince, hip-hop forebears like Lauryn Hill, and the jazz that inspired Michael Alvarado when he was learning to play piano.

“We had made two records before this,” Michael says. “The first one was, ‘Hey, we’re here, we make music together, we’re just trying to understand it.’ On the second one we tried to jump on the folk music fad; we liked it at the time, but it didn’t really honor our influences and how we grew up. We wanted to make this record about our skills, and about what we do best individually. It was about getting back on track, understanding what we excel in.”

Us The Duo are supporting *Just Love* with national touring, alternating arena dates as an opening act with headlining shows of their own.

“We’re supporting our friends Pentatonix,” Carissa says. “We were absolutely thrilled to take that opportunity. To be able to be in front of thousands of people every night in arenas is a blessing of opportunity, and we would be silly not to take it. It’s nice to spread our name and our music throughout these arenas.”

“We’re trying to bring real music back,” Michael adds, “and I think the fans of the shows at these arenas are appreciating it.”