

BREAKING

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## SHOVELS & ROPE

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PHOTO BY CURTIS WAYNE MILLARD



**MEMBERS:** Married duo Cary Ann Hearst and Michael Trent

**FOUNDED:** 2008

**FROM:** Charleston, South Carolina

**YOU MIGHT KNOW THEM FROM:** The time they sold out the Ryman Auditorium, their two Americana Awards, or any number of their previous bands or solo albums

**NOW:** Touring North America and Europe in support of their latest record, *Little Seeds*

LIFE IS HAPPENING AS USUAL for Cary Ann Hearst and Michael Trent. Their dog is barking. Their baby is crying. Their neighbor's kids are coming home from school. Fitting, because life was happening as usual when they met. That fateful night, their bands were sharing a bill. Now, Hearst and Trent are married, and they perform and write together as Shovels & Rope.

"It was a way to spend time together," says Hearst of their twofold matrimony. The group's name is also the title of the first album they wrote as a team, when they were both performing as solo artists. In that batch of songs, "there was a lot of hanging and burying," says Trent.

Before all of that, though—before they knew who the other was—Hearst and Trent had written, performed, and recorded with long lists of musicians. Their sonic pedigrees also run deep on both sides of the family.

"My dad and Cary's stepdad are bluegrass mandolin players," says Trent. "My parents listened to the country music of the '80s, which I hated at the time. I was more into the Violent Femmes and Nine Inch Nails—everything that would piss my dad off."

Hearst realized at an early age that music was something she couldn't ignore. "It happened in the third grade," she says. "I had just moved to Nashville, Tennessee. Metro/Davidson County Schools had a songwriting contest, and me and two girlfriends wrote a song for it. We won, and we got to sing our song at the Country Music Hall of Fame. And that was the earliest time that I thought, 'Oh, this is a job we can do?'"

Shovels & Rope's latest album, *Little Seeds*, marks their fourth together (though it's the third, officially, under that name). "I Know," the opening track, begins with

Hearst and Trent singing, "I know exactly what you think you are." That's the sense that pervades the thick air of this record—these two are partners in crime. The songs were written last summer, when Hearst was pregnant. Additionally, Trent's father was ill, so he and Trent's mother moved into their son and daughter-in-law's home during the recording process. The album was produced by Trent at the band's home studio, and he and Hearst played all the instruments, as they always do. Quarters were close. Life was happening.

A couple of the tracks on *Little Seeds* are about Trent's father. One, "The Ride," is in memory of a friend who was killed as they were finishing the album. Another one, the dirge-like "BWYR," is a response to the shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in their hometown of Charleston, South Carolina. That one served as an immediate reaction: Hearst and Trent wrote it in a hotel in Chicago while on tour, about to have their baby, and wanting desperately to be back home. "You learn to write wherever you are," Hearst says.

Despite their consistent themes and methods, the tour supporting *Little Seeds* is going to be something new for Shovels & Rope. "We're in kind of a growth spurt," Hearst says. "We're playing a little bit bigger venues, and a lot of people have seen us a couple of times. So things like lighting design are about to happen. You know, [we're] upping our game as much as we can in the live department. [But] the most exciting thing has nothing to do with the music. We started a family. It's a magical, amazing, challenging adventure."

Don't think the magnitude of any of the events of their past year was lost on Hearst or Trent. They found themselves, as Hearst puts it, in "the crosshairs of human existence." But that's what happens. They shush the dog. There's a brief pause.

"What were we saying?" asks Hearst, laughing. **F**