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MOM & DAD ARE FINE

On *Manticore*, Shovels & Rope
bring light to monsters.

By

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CARY ANN HEARST AND MICHAEL TRENT aren't particularly active on social media. "We're not out there doin' no TikTok-ing," Hearst says bluntly, laughing as she sips coffee in the studio behind their home near Charleston, S.C.

Trent is a little more pointed: "It's bad for us. It's actual poison."

That's not to say that followers of the Shovels & Rope Instagram account won't see the occasional onstage shot or cute family portrait, but it does underscore the old-school nature of this couple in their early 40s, now a decade into their career as a duo. They released *O' Be Joyful* in 2012, and its leadoff track, "Birmingham," almost single-handedly launched them into a national touring act. At the very moment when becoming famous seemingly came to require living your life on the internet, Hearst and Trent slipped in as the door shut behind them.

Their private nature leads to assumptions

about a couple that exuberates trademark joy from stage, yet writes verses that unpeel like new layers of an onion with each listen. On *Manticore*, their ninth album, the musical couple explore the myriad strains early parenthood can place on a marriage. It gets dark, but they come out swinging.

Shovels & Rope have never shaken “Birmingham.” It’s a modern Americana classic, boasting roughly autobiographical lyrics like, “Made a little money playing in the bars/ With two beat-up drums and two old guitars.” Crowds explode with them when they holler and harmonize, “It ain’t what you got/ It’s what you make!”

The song is a requisite at every show. “It becomes your ‘Wagon Wheel,’” Heart admits. “We skipped it one night in Birmingham. That might have been a mistake.”

Yet, nobody would call Shovels & Rope a one-hit wonder. Since *O’ Be Joyful* turned them into Americana darlings, they’ve released four more albums of original material, two documentary movies, three *Busted Jukebox* cover sets, and launched a major music festival, High Water.

In that same span, they’ve progressed from a van to an RV to a tour bus. And, along the way, they’ve filled those various means of transportation with a daughter (Louie) and son (Oskar)—who will disenroll from school to join their parents on tour this spring and even fly to Europe as part of Shovels & Rope’s summer run.

Ten years ago, in their first film, *The Ballad of Shovels & Rope*, the couple worked through their motivations for touring around in a van. “I’d like to see the world, or some part of it, and have it paid for by song,” Hearst stated. “What’s the ultimate goal? Just to keep on being able to do it and keep on liking to do it, so that we don’t have to do something else to be happy.”

By that yardstick, they’ve made it. From the Crescent City to the Great Salt Lake, Shovels & Rope fill rooms by gazing into each other’s eyes and singing poignant poetry in rough-hewn unison, all while banging away on guitars, a kick drum and a snare.

But throughout *Manticore*, a nine-song “midtempo masterpiece”—Hearst’s half-joking reference—they hint at a more sobering reality. Once you’ve achieved your goals, life doesn’t suddenly get easy, especially when you add kids to the mix.

“Bleed me,” the duo sings to their children on the album’s fourth track, a part love song, part I’m-so-tired-I-could-melt confessional. “I will remain/ Yours to drain/ You are the best part.”

It’s a heart-wrenching admission, yet any parent can immediately sympathize. In the same moment that children can take everything their parents have, they can simultaneously fill their grown-ups back up. Yet, the friendship at the core of any relationship—the marital bond—still feels the weight.

MOST BANDS WILL BREAK UP AT SOME point during their career arc—or at least go home for a while so that the individual members can clear their heads and spend some time on their own. But marriages don’t traditionally work like that. And when you combine the two—and then find success doing it—there’s a special kind of pressure to be Johnny and June every time you step out the door.

“I’ve been insecure about feeling projected upon, where the projection is like featherweight,” Hearst admits. “It’s like, ‘Look at them. Look at mom and pop go. We know that they’re tired. We know that they’re weird artists who are trying to do their best.’ I’m a people-pleaser, so I need everybody to be happy and having a good time, so I don’t stop and say, ‘Listen, everybody, we have problems just like the rest of you.’”

On *Manticore*, the songs do that for them. “Divide and Conquer” begins by telling a version of their origin story: “Town to town. We went hard/ Parked at

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CARY ANN HEARST

the hotel/ Slept in our car/ I’ll tell a joke.
You sway and saunter/ We found a way.
Divide and conquer.”

Yet, as the tune progresses, things fall apart. “Shut you out ‘cause you wouldn’t shut up/ Cut me down till I couldn’t get up,” they sing, still in unison, still gazing in each other’s eyes. The couple splits up, each taking a child. “Are we just a myth?” they ask.

It’s stomach-turning stuff because it

feels so real. When he wrote the initial lyrics in 2019, Trent ruminated on the things that destroy a family, adding lines like, “Then the sickness came/ Then came the weather.” The pandemic wasn’t a headline outside of Wuhan yet, but it still feels like the tale of a relationship in a tailspin as the world collapses.

Hearst calls the track “Bummerham,” yet the song’s couple, and its real-life performers, persevere: “What once moved like water became a monolith/ No longer free but somehow stronger/ Come back to me/ Here is my armor.”

“I can see people listening to this record and being like, ‘Are the Shovels OK? Are they going to make it?’” Hearst speculates. “It’s like the mom and dad are breaking up speech, except we’re not. We love each other very much and we’re doing great. Mom and dad are fine.”

The legend of the mantichore originated in Persia, but its variations span Greek mythology to early Christian iconography. The version gracing the cover of *Manticore* meets the requisite characteristics—a lion’s body, a horned, human face and a scorpion’s tail, reflecting the band’s astrological signs. (Hearst is a Leo; Trent is a Scorpio.)

Like their lyrics, it’s wound with reality and mystery. “We get idealized because what we’ve got is an ideal thing, but it’s also a monster,” Hearst claims.

Manticore kicks off with “Domino,” a head-nodding banger sung by the imagined ghost of James Dean. It’s the obvious first single because it’s fun, but it’s also a slyly grim rumination on death and public legacy.

“No Man’s Land” strikes a similar balance of hope and despair. Inspired by the Christmas Truce of World War I, it begins with a soldier writing to his mother, promising that if his brother dies, “We’ll die together.”

“Happy Birthday Who” sees the world through the eyes of a mentally ill homeless person: “There are people in my head/ Some are nice but most are mean.”

And on “The Human Race,” the closing track and second single, they sing, “Shall we get it over with and take one in the temple?” The album ends with the line, “Shit and death turn to good dirt/ If you give it long enough.”

Releasing a single in 2022 requires strategy—the goal is to land on streaming playlists. Hearst explains, “We’ve got the rock-and-roll end of the spectrum with ‘Domino,’ and I guess ‘The Human Race’ will be on the morning anti-depressant playlist—maybe the cutters’ playlist.”

And while a slow, moody song like



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"The Human Race" may hit a ceiling of five-million streams, Shovels & Rope don't need another "Birmingham."

"There's very little expectation in the Americana and folk world that you're going to have a massive hit," Hearst explains. "Our friends' massive hits can keep the entire industry afloat while we just keep getting medium hits."

That laidback, true-to-your-art approach has a precedent. "We've always fancied ourselves to be acolytes of Elvis Costello," Hearst says. "The older we get, the more we look to his career and the seemingly zero fucks with which he's regarded the needs of the industry."

"I just don't care anymore, and that feels great," Trent adds. "The best art is made without expectation. You're not trying to live up to anything by it—it's just pure. It's not necessarily going to be a hit, but in the end, you have this body of work that really is your art. And it's also for sale, so enjoy it—please buy it—but there's no pressure or weird expectations."

JOHNS ISLAND TEETERS ON THE RIM OF TWO eras. The sweetest tomatoes in the world were once grown here—the fourth largest island on the East Coast—but now clear cuts and tract homes creep toward the remaining farms. Twenty minutes from booming Charleston, the occasional rebel flag still flies tattered outside rusty trailers, along roads that snake past live oaks draped with Spanish moss.

Hearst and Trent call a corner of this island home, down a winding road where the neighbors' chickens wander freely. At the back of their lot stands a long, rectangular building, known as The Whip. It's here that their last half decade of

creative work has materialized.

Shovels & Rope have never scheduled time in a studio to record an album—their entire body of work has begun with an audio signal flowing into Trent's laptop. That once meant setting up microphones in a room of their rental house or recording in their van. Today, Hearst can finish folding the laundry, hop out back to sing a new verse and scoot out in time for the pickup line at school.

It's not entirely DIY, but it's close. All but one of their records have been released through Dualtone, a "zero drama" partnership that functions on mutual trust.

"We have a secret good-people magnet," Hearst says. "We've had the kindest label and the coolest nanny and the most wonderful manager—all the infrastructure."

When Hearst learned she was pregnant—hours before getting on a plane to Louisville for a New Year's gig with Jason Isbell—she worried what it could mean for their career.

"Have you ever shit in a bag?" she asks. Van life clearly wasn't going to cut it anymore—touring with kids requires a few more creature comforts and a lot more patience.

Hearst explains, "We said, 'We're going to build this nest and we're going to put the nest on the wheels of the tour bus, and we're going to take it everywhere we go.'" Job interviews shifted to, "Can you sleep within 10 feet of a crying child? You can? You're hired."

Even with the pieces in place, they still question themselves when they're in the middle of the country, plowing through a swirling snowstorm with small kids in tow.

"You can be in any kind of situation and

still feel like you're doing the wrong thing. You start to think that you're parenting wrong, husbanding wrong, wife-ing wrong," Trent says. "Moving down the road in a tube is its own world, and it's really hard to explain to anybody because they're like, 'Oh, you've got it made,' and in a lot of ways, you do, but it's a certain way of living."

After years of road-dogging, the pandemic gave the Hearst/Trent family unit time to reflect.

"We achieved some clarity during the break—it was like, 'Wait a second. We can have more balance,'" Trent says.

"Knowing what we know now—having been forced to learn it—we'll be a little more reasonable in how we proceed," Hearst says. "The kids are getting older, so how do you accommodate things like whether they get to go to karate class? We have to have a plan for all of that."

On "Collateral Damage," Hearst wrestles with her children waking up for the day not long after she's finally walked off the stage after a show "Walking around like a shadow/ Is a person that I used to know," she sings. Trent joins for the album's earworm: "I get a little hazy on the details/ How the whole thing went off the rails."

"I love that we could write that song," Hearst admits. "It's a real feeling every person will have when they're balancing power and efficacy and children in a relationship, and figuring out who you are and what's left of you and how to grow."

Cary Ann Hearst may be constantly rebalancing inside but, to the observer, she's a confident force of nature. Onstage, her tiny frame belies the beast that's banging away on the guitar or drums while belting out revealing lyrics that land with illusory lightheartedness. Hearst builds her dialogue with jokes. But, when she reflects on the post-second-child, pre-and-early pandemic emotion that shaped *Manticore*, she settles into the couch and pulls a Navajo blanket around her shoulders.

"Most people have some kind of clinical depression," she says, softly. "I spent a lot of time during the last couple of years just investigating that and medicating for that. And the joke with the songs on this album was like, 'I'm having a hard time and I need to be on my antidepressant.' At the end of the song, it kicks in and nothing bad happens and you get that redemption."

"And then the hero dies," Trent says with a laugh.

"But my girl can't do it!" cries Hearst. "My girl has to come out on the other side." 📍

