



From A Scratch And A Hope

The Story of Shovels & Rope

BY LYNNE MARGOLIS | PHOTOS BY LESLIE RYAN MCKELLAR

LET'S TALK, FOR A SECOND, ABOUT SHOVELS AND ROPE. As tools. You might regard shovels as a device for clearing driveways after snowstorms. And you might use rope to pull a sled, or rig up a tree swing in nicer weather.

But not so long ago, ropes in trees were also used for people to swing *from*. And shovels were handy for digging holes to lay them in. Permanently.

Yes, it's kind of a creepy image on which to build a musical identity. But for Cary Ann Hearst and Michael Trent, the South Carolina duo who sometimes engage in the time-honored tradition of spinning such violent acts into epically dramatic murder ballads – whose songs, come to think of it, often address disaster, tragedy and human-caused mayhem – the name Shovels & Rope is fitting. Es-

pecially in a country where one can still find plenty of references to hangin' trees.

But let's not forget a loftier use for those tools: Rescue. As in shoveling or towing someone out when they get stuck. When you push yourself to musical edges as often as these two do, having a partner who can toss you a line – a melodic shift, a high or low harmony, an actual lyric – means everything, especially when there's only two of you in the band. Having one another's back takes on even more meaning when you're also partners in life, as Hearst and Trent have been since they tied the knot in 2009. ("Getting married," jokes Hearst, "was the easy part!")

They even use a rope-ringed life preserver as the cover image on their new album, *Swimmin' Time*, though it more likely evokes the aquatic theme

flowing through many of the album's 13 tracks. A theme, incidentally, that was not intentional. At first.

"We figured that out as we were going," Trent says, sharing a speaker-phone with Hearst during a rare moment at their home on Johns Island, south of Charleston. "We realized we had a song about a submarine [the somber, haunting "Thresher"]. We had a song about all the rivers around where we live ["Stono River Blues"]. 'Swimmin' Time' is definitely ..."

"It defines the theme," Hearst finishes. "By the time [the song] 'Swimmin' Time' came out, we thought, 'Well, clearly there's a thread.'"

That's exactly how Shovels & Rope was born as well. What started out for kicks and cash turned into such a potent, passionate marriage of their country, blues, rock, folk and twang-punk influences, they couldn't ignore it — any more than they could ignore their attraction. They tell this story in "Birmingham," on their 2012 Dualtone debut *O' Be Joyful*, which ranked third on *American Songwriter's* Top 50 Albums of 2012 list. The song itself was No. 1 on 2012's Top 50 Songs list. It also took Song of the Year at the Americana Music Association's 2013 Americana Honors & Awards, where the couple was anointed Emerging Artist of the Year as well.

As "Birmingham" obliquely conveys, their respective threads unspool typically enough. Born in the Mississippi Delta, Hearst landed in Nashville at age 8. Her parents had divorced, and her mother (the song's "Delta mama") married a bluegrass-loving, mandolin-playing "Nickajack man" who taught his stepdaughters about singing and songwriting. Hearst grew up dabbling in bands with friends, including Dustin Welch, son of Kevin Welch. Steeped in classic country, she also had a hankering for musical bad boys like Iggy Pop. When she headed to college in Charleston, she packed her guitar, her formidable voice and her sugar-and-spice, charm-and-sass personality. She studied history, though her undeclared double-major was partying and music-making.

Inevitably, Hearst wound up onstage, and one night in Athens, Georgia, circa 2002 or '03, her band Borrowed Angels (after the Mel Street song) shared a bill with Trent's band The Films, which Hearst has described as "a sexy nasty little rock and roll band," and headliner Jump, Little Children.

The Films, formed in high school, had moved from Colorado to Charleston by then. Trent's actually a Houston native, but his family headed to the Rocky Mountains when he was 3, turning him into the "Rockamound Cowboy" referenced in "Birmingham." He fell in love with rock and roll, but also got

schooled in country from his father, another bluegrass-mandolin picker. His diehard-Texan mother and older siblings, meanwhile, made sure he appreciated his Lone Star heritage. Eventually, he found himself seduced by "the darker side of storytelling in country music," à la Townes Van Zandt and Elvis Costello's *Almost Blue*.

He tried studying music in college, but The Films won out — especially after landing a major-label deal. They also got ground through, as Hearst puts it, "the big record-label sausage machine" before finding some success as an indie band.

Hearst and Trent became self-described friends, though "Birmingham" suggests a very mutual, long-term attraction. Somewhere along the way, Trent moved to New York. Hearst began fronting Cary Ann Hearst & the Gun Street Girls, whose sound she once characterized as basted in "saltwater and religion," with "a slow Southern dip and strut."

Little Miss Firecracker and the Girls burned up stages at the 2007 Austin City Limits, CMJ and Americana Music festivals, giving every indication they'd explode, but Hearst says they weren't a serious entity.

"We had big dreams," she says, "but we didn't really have a plan." Or an album, touring vehicle or compatible schedules. She did have a solo album, however: *Dust And Bones*. Then another, *Lions And Lambs*, which she and Trent recorded in L.A. with producer Butch Walker and Trent's Films bandmate Jake Sinclair. (One track, "Hell's Bells," aired over the closing credits of a "True Blood" episode and landed on the compilation, *True Blood: Music from the HBO Original Series, Vol. 3.*) So she decided to try her luck as a solo artist. Trent, who'd also recorded a solo album, *The Winner*, figured he'd do the same. In 2008, they'd also thrown a batch of those disaster, tragedy and human-caused mayhem songs onto a disc they titled *Shovels & Rope*.

"We were both super proud of those records and wanted to tour them, and had big ideas but no plans," Trent relates. "We just started playing in the bars to make some dough, and we'd play songs from all three of those records. We figured out how to play each other's songs in this two-man band, with just a very few instruments and a lot of harmonies."

Like much of what they do, it was spontaneous; in fact, one might assume their least favorite activity in the whole world is planning. They reference everything from songwriting to major life events with terms such as "happencence," "on-the-fly" and "by accident." That

is not to imply that they don't work their asses off. Or strategize. But "risk" and "chance" form major strands of their DNA, and all balancing acts occur without a net. They're musical daredevils, going where the songs take them. That philosophy extends to the stage — set lists be damned.

Though they hadn't envisioned themselves as an official entity, their musical chemistry proved every bit as intense as their physical attraction. One night, while playing in Birmingham, Alabama, it dawned on them that they actually could be a real duo — and make a real living at it.

"We had big dreams, but we didn't really have a plan."

Thrilling and unpredictable, their combined energy is like a controlled burn that threatens to leap wildly out of bounds, only to shift at the last second into a pile of warmly glowing embers.

Swimmin' Time's "After The Storm," for example, starts with pretty, restrained harmonies and gentle strumming, but as their voices rise, its momentum swells. When Hearst hits an upper-soprano note, the effect is dramatic. Then she dives low, and when they reach and hold a shared high note, it's like a knockout punch. It's hard to imagine the song getting any bigger — but then they go a cappella. It's the definition of a tour de force.

From the bubbly pop undertones of "Bridges On Fire" to the fuzzed-out grunge of "Evil" and the sexy, Fats Domino-meets-"Hail Hail" groove of "Coping Mechanism," their dynamic interplay and lyrical twists give *Swimmin' Time* intriguing depth — and the same sense of risk they exhibit onstage.

One moment, they're bashing away and shouting like cheeky punks; the next, they're cheek-to-cheek, singing close harmonies and sounding so sweet, you could swear you're hearing them fall in love all over again.

Except for those sometimes-darker songs, and the fact that they're also engaged in intricate, finely choreographed instrumental gymnastics, employing multiple body parts to activate a kick drum, snare and hi-hat, keyboard, harmonica, tambourines and various other percussion instruments, plus guitars — some of which have been kept alive through sheer force of will. And duct tape. As if all that weren't enough, they take turns strumming and thumping as they sing for all they're worth, instinctively trading high and low parts, their voices swooping and soaring like birds in a mid-flight mating dance.



Cary Ann Hearst is a southern child, all right; even her speech is filled with the melodic cadences and colloquialisms of a Dixie girl. She likes gingham, ruffles and lace, and she can pour so much honeysuckle syrup over a “bless your heart,” the recipient would never detect a note of derision, if Hearst would deliver such a thing. She is not, however, a southern *belle* – a latter-day plantation princess raised to measure others on a status-and-privilege scale. She’s used to doing the waiting, not being waited on; in fact, she still keeps her Jestine’s Kitchen apron clean, just in case she might need to pick up some shifts at the Charleston eatery where she worked for more than a dozen years.

Michael Trent is a bit harder to peg. He seems more serious, but his jokes, it turns out, are just more subtle. Once they get going, their repartee is a thing to behold – sometimes a downright laff riot. Occasionally laden with the gallows humor that is, after all, their stock in trade.

Their friend Butch Walker, who’s also written with Trent, used Hearst as a backing vocalist and had both *The Films* and *Shovels & Rope* open for him on tour, observes, “That couple are about the coolest under pressure that I’ve ever seen, just the way that they handle and carry themselves. It’s very sweet. I don’t know if I’ve ever seen Mike stressed ... She’s always the loud, happy, fun one and Mike is this stoic, shy guy. But it all works.

“I’ve never been in a room with them where I wasn’t grinning ear to ear,” he adds, “because their positivity and chillness is infectious.”

What makes the story of *Shovels & Rope* simultaneously ironic and fascinating is that the duo’s very existence was such a desperation maneuver. They had no inkling that turning the album *Shovels & Rope* into *Shovels & Rope* would launch them on anything like their current trajectory, which also has included a Letterman appearance, an *Austin City Limits* taping and high-profile bookings at major festivals.

“I’d been spinnin’ my wheels for so long, we were just happy to be making a living and touring,” says Hearst. “The reason that we went in together is because we didn’t want to be apart.”

They struggled for a long time, Walker says, “But they just toured relentlessly, all the time,

in the van with the dog. They would pack up the house and be gone for six months at a time.”

Adds Trent, “Our expectations were so low at the beginning, it was like, ‘Stay out of the red.’”

“Do not get pulled over and go to jail,” Hearst injects, laughing.

“Go out for the weekend or a week and break even, or maybe bring 100 bucks home and be able to get back in time for our shift,” Trent expounds.

“Maybe in our former careers, or when we were a lot younger, we had loftier goals,” he continues. “Then we put all that aside and started doing this, without any expectations, and were like, ‘No way we’re gonna be playing at Red Rocks opening for The Avett Brothers. We don’t even have real drums; we’re, like, barely hanging on.’ But for whatever reason, once we resigned ourselves to be content with doing things the way we wanted to and being happy about it no matter what, everything just started happening.”

Actually, it started happening because they’re incredibly talented and because *O’Be Joyful*, recorded at home, in hotel rooms and even in their van, is such a knockout album, full of well-crafted, well-executed songs with intriguing subject matter and loads of personality. But when they made it, Trent says, “We just thought we were making a new record of new songs. We didn’t know that it was going to do anything besides be a thing that we sold out of the back of our van.”

That was before Dualtone stepped in, offering them a label deal before hearing a note of recorded music. As wary as Trent was of the sausage-grinder, they realized Dualtone’s distribution and promotional arms could reach much farther than the van’s rear doors.

That’s when the couple formalized a management agreement with friend and adviser Paul Bannister, whom Hearst had met in New York while seeking a solo label deal. Just before the album’s summer 2012 release, they also graduated to an RV – though they feared having it photographed for a *Charleston City Paper* story lest fans think success had spoiled them. Still, after countless hours chasing tour buses while opening for Walker, Hayes Carll (Hearst duetted with him on the lusty “Another Like You,” which ranked No. 1 on *American Songwriter’s* 2011 Top 50 Songs list) and anyone else they could, they and Plott hound Townes Van Zandt had earned it.

And now, they’re in a bus. Walker laughs when he recalls introducing them to his au-





Photo by Molly Hayes

dience and joking that one day, they'd wind up with his tour bus and crew and he'd be their bus-chasing opening act.

"That's pretty much what's fucking happening," he says. "They've got half of my old road crew. I told them a couple of weeks ago, 'That was real funny, but I'm probably going to end up asking you guys to let me open for you.'"

For the record, they claim it's just for Townes. Asked if he has his own bunk, Trent replies, "He takes up the community space and forces people to sit on the floor." Hearst calls the 6-year-old hound "a fame whore," who hasn't learned to make himself useful because "he's too busy getting his belly scratched and signing autographs."

Some of those scratches might soon come from fellow Americana darling John Fullbright, who's doing a run of fall shows with them.

"I love those guys a lot," he says. "That's one of the bands that I think is just the wave of the future, by way of the past. The songwriting is *sooo* good. I can't believe that those two people not only write songs together,

but are *married*. What a perfect world that those two even exist in the same plane ... I hate even saying the word 'genius' because it gets thrown around all the time, but I really think that they're doing some really important stuff ... Cary writes such sweet ballads, such break-your-heart stuff. I just hope that's always the case."

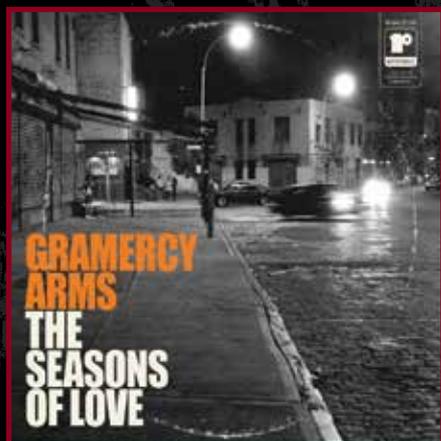
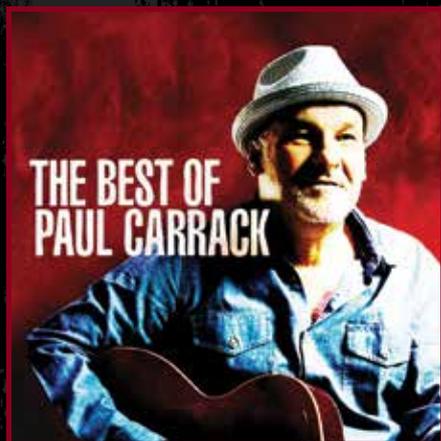
"If somebody would have said, 'Hey, guess what's going to happen? You and your wife are going to be in a two-man band and you're gonna travel around together and it's gonna work but it's just gonna be the two of you' - if you would've told me that when I was younger, there's no way I could've seen that happening," Trent says. "Once it did start happening and we started figuring it out ... like, 'Oh man, this is actually what we're doing. This is our family business.' ... You also gotta stand there and say, 'I'm grateful for this; I can't believe the way that this worked out.' If somebody would have allowed me to draw out how I wanted it to happen, I couldn't

have drawn it out any better."

Adds Hearst: "There were some hard times, but when I think about it, it's just like the most fun version of the most fun year that you could have ... Without shooting myself in the foot, I'm so happy, it doesn't really ever have to get any better. It could just stay like this forever. ... We're very blessed. We are beaming with hope and we're feeling like we've overcome a lot and we've pushed ourselves to a place where we never expected.

"The only life that we've really known, since before we were married, was creating music together and trying to figure out a way to make it work," she adds. "And every single day that we're out there with a lot of our peers who miss their wives and children and they're sacrificing so much, we know that we're in an amazing position."

More than a month before its release, *Swimmin' Time* had already climbed to No. 4 on the Americana Music Association chart, an auspicious beginning that bodes well for



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its future. Before it runs its course, we could see even more recognition for the band. We might also see Hearst “pregnant and playing drums.” Of course, there’s no specific plan. But there is one goal, she says.

“Creatively, we always are trying to write better songs and tell better stories.”

Speaking of which ... there’s the matter of *The Ballad of Shovels & Rope*.

Oh, forgive us; we haven’t yet told that tale. It’s the story of a scrappy DIY musician couple trying to scratch out a living, which includes creating Internet video content. Their videographers, the Moving Picture Boys, become so enamored of the duo that they propose a documentary chronicling the making of *O’ Be Joyful*.

Director Jace Freeman elaborates: “I got introduced to Michael and Cary, loved their sound, realized that they’re amazing people as well as fantastic songwriters and learned that they were going to be doing this two-man group full-time. After hearing that they were about to embark on that little adventure, we thought we might as well tag along.”

In a classic case of scope creep, the project

stretched from a few months to a few years.

“It just kept growing in a way that was more exciting and only benefited the story that we were trying to tell, which from the get-go was the DIY story,” Freeman says.

The fact that no one knew what to expect made the film process more fascinating, according to Bannister. “We just knew we believed in them as performers and musicians, and I thought, ‘Somebody’s gotta find a way to connect them with a larger audience.’”

Even before he became their manager, he became a co-producer – and wound up moving to Charleston. But he credits Freeman with having the big-picture vision, and Du-altone for believing as well, along with the band’s fans, who blew away his skepticism about raising \$20,000 on Kickstarter by contributing that amount in the first 24 hours; the total reached almost \$43,500. (Now hitting the festival circuit, it already won a Nashville Film Festival award.)

“This is a commentary on them as musicians, but also a commentary on them as human beings,” Bannister says. “They are two of the most humble and authentic human

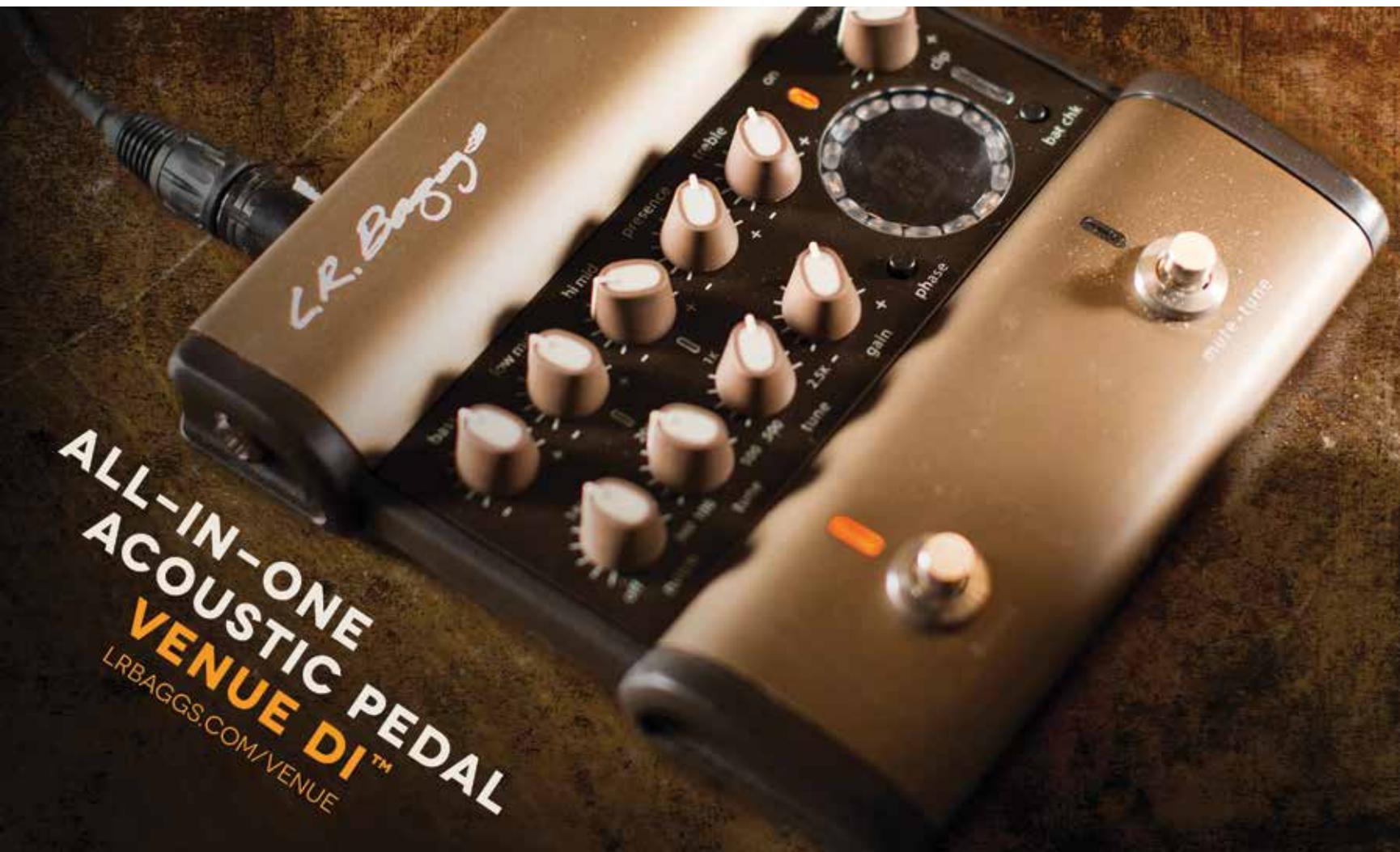
beings I have ever met. And that’s what will keep them around.

“Sometimes we have to pinch ourselves to make sure we don’t fuck it up because we have somehow managed to wake up in this beautiful scenario where – especially in this business, where everyone gets so ugly and cut-throat – we have these people around us who really are in it for the right reasons. We will never take that for granted.”

The Ballad of Shovels & Rope couldn’t have scripted a better ending than the one it has, in which this cute, committed couple humbly accept their Americana awards, then perform “Birmingham” at the Ryman Auditorium, the mother church.

“It ain’t what you got it’s what you make!” Hearst sings jubilantly, while Trent blows some lonesome harmonica. Then, in perfect harmony:

*When the road got rough and the wheels all broke
And we couldn’t take more than we could tow
Well, we made somethin’ out of nothin’
From a scratch and a hope
Two old guitars, like a shovel and a rope. ★*



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