



A couple of weeks ago, a married couple from Charleston, S.C. posted a listing online for their beloved RV. “This RV rides around 3 people and a dog in style and comfort,” the listing noted. “A couple with a pair of shorties, or some wise elderly lovers on the road trip of a life time would relish this rolling house.”

The beloved ‘08 Winnebago had already seen its fair share of adventures, winding through Big Sur for birthdays and parking between Grizzly Bear and Sigur Rós for raved-out backstage Coachella parties. For Shovels & Rope, the musical couple behind the heartfelt listing, the vehicle played host to several years of milestones, from playing the Ryman for the first time to housing a growing crew as they toured behind breakout album *O’ Be Joyful*. And although they’ve outgrown the “rolling house” that saw them through, it’s an apt physical metaphor for their uncanny ability to remain at ease and at home in any venue.

“We’d gotten to this point with touring where we’d already toured so hard, and then the record came out,” remembers Cary Ann Hearst, whose bright, playful energy makes up one-half of the duo. “And there was no rest in preparation for that. It was like a football player playin’ injured.”

They made it work, though: taking care of themselves on the road, allowing them to take advantage of the momentum they’d been gaining on the stage with shows that were energetic, memorable and uniquely personal. The duo’s latest, *Swimmin’ Time*, is a maelstrom of rock sensibilities, gospel-tinged energy and old country storytelling that embraces not only the celebrated songwriters of their home region, but also the couple’s DIY attitude. After the runaway success of 2012’s *O’ Be Joyful*, Hearst and husband Michael Trent elected to record the follow-up at home, constructing a studio in the biggest room of their new home in coastal South Carolina and sticking to their characteristic minimal production.

“We recorded everything, all the vocals at least, face-to-face, with just enough room for one microphone or two microphones,” Trent said. “So all of those tracks are live, and we’d just kind of read each other’s eyebrows. I feel like it helps with the intensity of the track, we’ve just been singing together for so long, we can kinda tell where one another are going with it.”

Anyone who’s seen the couple’s electric chemistry on-stage likely has a crisp visual of what the recording process must have *looked* like, and for a band that thrives on the road the pressure was particularly high to to translate that intensity into a recording.

“We don’t use a lot of stuff—Michael will tell you, we use like two microphones, sing everything live, real close together,” Cary agreed. “Some of it’s in one microphone, but there’s not a whole lot to work with except for the instruments that we have lying around, per usual. Except we did have a magical microphone.”

It’s true: thanks to friends with Electric Lady studios, the pair borrowed a mic

used by Jimi Hendrix for a little “good mojo.”

“Yeah, Cary sang into *that* one,” laughed Trent. “Actually, I probably *should* have sang into it. I’m the one that needs the help.”

Hearing about the writing and recording process from Hearst and Trent only accentuates the obvious connection between the two, as they frequently speak about “our brain” and “our life” as a single unit, each deflecting praise and credit to the other.

“I think it’s important to note, too, that ‘self-produced’—I think it’s important to indicate that *Michael* produced.” Hearst retorts after Trent praises her vocals. “I worked on it, I was there. But it’s really Michael.”

The way the couple recalls old stories, too, keeps up with the shared-brain mentality that stays subtly evident in conversation, and on *Swimmin’ Time* the strong narrative element in lyrics is just one way this teamwork reveals itself.

“The circumstances of each recording situation almost dictate what happens with the songwriting,” Hearst said. “In this case, we were on the road preceding the record, and we tend to write our own little nuggets here and there. Get an idea pile going. Phones, papers. And then, when we were coming home from the road, we sat down with all the ideas and went through the ideas that we liked, and just writing them out together and finishing them.”

The narrative angle in Shovels & Rope’s songwriting is more evident than ever on *Swimmin’ Time*, which takes a third-person viewpoint in many cases. Darker imagery like blood, broken bones, fire and doom fill the stanzas.

“There’s gotta be a story, and conflict propels plot, and plot propels story,” Hearst says of the darker themes. “You have protagonists and antagonists and conflict to propel drama, and I think that’s just the way we paint those pictures. We want *bite* and I think the imagery comes from that... Not to say that we’re like Cormac McCarthy, but we *like* Cormac McCarthy and we like the way he uses words and violence. You feel violence and visceral grit and stuff, when you read his books. And we strive for that in the way that we write.”

This overtly dark imagery may seem odd once you meet the couple who are as good-natured and friendly as you could ask, but the layered meaning in each track provides a better glimpse at the multi-dimensional characters and feelings behind each lyric. “Evil,” for example, has some powerhouse percussion and an ominous tone, but the overall message says something different.

“There are bits of hope in there,” says Trent. “‘Evil’ is a very dark song, it’s a very dark-sounding song, but when you sort of brush away what’s on the surface and you dig down to what’s really going on it’s actually kind of a sweet story. I’m really into stories like that, where things aren’t always as they seem. I think a lot of people are. It’s intriguing; it’s something that maybe is a goal: to try to learn

how to be better storytellers and have stories with a lot of layers.”

That penchant for conflict and layers is perhaps most present and brimming with emotion on the album’s final track, “Thresher,” the band’s saga about a doomed submarine. While the narrative may be from a character’s point of view, a personal touch lies in the details: in the background, a close listen reveals a hidden second track: what Hearst describes as an “Easter egg” left by Trent, a recording of Hearst’s step-grandfather “Pappy” Powell singing Kris Kristofferson’s “Why Me, Lord?”

“The recording is like a field recording,” says Hearst of the faint, baritone-tinged background track. “Michael has always got his phone ready when we’re hanging around with the old timers in my family.”

“Because there’s gold—especially Cary’s grandparents,” adds Trent. “Once everybody starts getting a little bit loose and it gets late at night we’ll roll it... Most recently Cary and him were singing on the porch and he was cutting loose. I recorded it with the phone. And I wanted to drop something in there right as the crew realized that that was it: they weren’t coming back up. And thinking about what they might have all been thinking about: maybe praying, or thinking about their family.”

“And it’s like a prayer: Lord help me Jesus, I have wasted it so,” notes Hearst. “Isn’t that what he’s saying?”

The loose involvement of religious undertones and imagery is another natural side effect of the band infusing their music with influences close to home—literally.

“When we were recording it, we were experimenting with different clap patterns that we had recognized from some Smithsonian recordings that we have of Gullah Gospel,” says Hearst. “Recordings that were made, you know, five miles from our home, which is also kind of neat, back in the ‘30s and ‘40s.”

But while “gospel” is a word that’s been tossed around as critics attempt to describe the genre-shirking duo, that sphere of influence hardly revolves around religious themes.

“For me, a gospel song—it doesn’t even have to be religious,” notes Hearst. “It’s something that shakes your spirit at its core, and a lot of that is through the method of exalted singing and clapping and rhythms that kind of make you feel like you wanna shake, make people physically shake, in response to it.”

There are plenty of purely musical elements of gospel music on *Swimmin’ Time*, from an emphasis on vocals and understated instrumentals to rhythm and clapping, but Hearst is quick to also note that, indirectly, a deeper understanding of religious themes and intentions may have informed their music in an unintentional way, too.

“We both have a very complicated relationship with our religious upbringing, but we know that vernacular, and we know how to speak to people who also know that vernacular,” said Hearst. “A lot of that stuff that we were raised with is *good*. It’s that stuff that we all carry from being raised that way that’s good, that makes you feel stronger, that makes you feel community. We use that in a lot of ways when we write.”

Perhaps it’s that dedication not to the literal themes, but rather to the way they make a person feel, that gives Shovels & Rope’s music a timeless quality. It’s easy to see how *Swimmin’ Time* could translate to any decade, with sounds ranging from the aforementioned gospel to doo-wop and straight rock-’n’-roll.

“We’re not by any stretch of the imagination purists about our music, and we kinda actually have a little bit of a snotty attitude about how we won’t be dictated to by tradition,” says Hearst. “But we *cherish* tradition very much, and we were both mandolin players who played bluegrass music and [were] kinda educated in musical traditions, but we didn’t necessarily want to have to be beholden to anything.”

Despite a background in bluegrass tradition, they laugh at how often their own music draws comparisons to the genre.

“That’s one thing we don’t have,” says Hearst. “There’s hardly any bluegrass in our music at all.”

“It’s a lie. I mean, we have drums! Electric guitars,” laughs Trent.”

“Yeah, *no* mandolins or banjos, or fiddles! Like, there are three notably absent instruments that could remotely qualify us,” adds Hearst. “And yet, we’re welcome to the table, aren’t we?”

It’s true that the duo has been embraced by the folk, country and bluegrass community, with slots on the lineup at Stagecoach Festival and back-to-back years at Newport Folk. Southern songwriting has, of course, played a role in the band’s development—widely-known single “Birmingham” is basically a role-call of Southern cities, and Hearst’s endearing drawl gives any track a country tinge—but the influence lies beyond surface-level markers like instrument choice or down-home idioms.

“Geography, and the traveling we’ve done over the past couple years and this vacuum we’ve created has influenced us as people and definitely our music,” Hearst says. “This record was informed less by the geography of our travels than the absence from home, the longing for the personal relationships that were just rusting at home because we were just gone all the time. We were thinking about *Dad*, recreational fishing, worrying about how we’d just bought our little house in Charleston and we’re all of a sudden worried that it’s gonna be flooded out in 30 years! The geographical nature of being Southern or living in the South has influenced us more.”

“Something that sounds strictly like country music can be as punk rock as anything else,” says Trent. “It’s just more about the way that you do it, and you setting your own boundaries instead of letting somebody else set them for you.”

In that respect, Shovels & Rope is as much a rock band as anything else, maintaining control of everything to the recording process to their touring and aesthetic.

“We really insulate ourselves to stay focused on what it is that we want to do,” says Hearst. We’re really selfish about it, and stingy and exclusive and snarly, even, about anybody comin’ around trying to tell us about how we’re gonna do the music thing because we been doing it so long. It’s cost us blood, sweat and tears and loneliness and poverty and all these things to get to where we are today. To *now* start to have somebody trying to tell us what *they* think is best. That kind of represents what I think you might say, rock-n-roll. It’s kind of a no-holds-barred blood bath, but we’re not doing it with drugs and strippers and shiesty managers. We’re doing it like ‘mom-n-poppa has had enuffa this foolishness, and we’re gonna do this the way we wanna do it’ kind.”

Shovels & Rope certainly put in their share of hours at dives and tiny clubs, both separately and as a unit, before they began touring and recording. Trent, who had been performing original music with his rock band The Films for years, met Hearst at a show in Athens, Ga., and they shared a community and a background filled with beer and bar gigs.

“For me, any bit of chops I have came out of it,” says Hearst. “I, getting out of college was starting in a honky-tonk bar band. We were shitty but awesome, and we were learning how to sing together—learning how much we could actually drink before we actually couldn’t play our instruments. Being in a bar band is a humbling experience: If you have any delusions of grandeur, you think you’re the best musician or you deserve attention, you will have your hopes and dreams shattered and your skin thickened by playing in a bar band.”

“Because you are *not* the star of the show,” Trent interjects, jokingly. “The guy who’s the most obnoxious guy in the bar, the guy that’s pole dancing on the beam that’s right in front of the stage is gonna be the star of the show. You’re like, fifth on the list.”

“But sometimes you can make ‘em dance,” says Hearst. “And then you’re like ‘Oh, this? This gets a reaction!’ If you actually engage the audience, you learn a little mind control.”

These mind-control tactics, which seem to generally take the form of foot-stomping good times, wailing vocals and evolving instrumentals, have been the life blood of Shovels & Rope, whose ceaseless touring has enabled them to prove just how much ground a duo can cover. This shared motive of taking one another’s performance to the next level makes for a chemistry that’s greater than

the sum of its parts: after years on the same circuit separately, it wasn't long after they began playing *together* that Shovels & Rope began to take off.

"People started asking us to go on tour with them," says Trent. "My band that I had been with since high school was sputtering but we'd been at it for like 10 years. And Cary's thing, it was doing stuff, but neither one of us really had a plan. So we started getting calls after performing as a duo, just little four-hour bar gigs. We would get a call for *that*. They were like no, not your band, can we have *that* come out and open up for us?"

The stages got bigger, but for an act that sings of "makin' something outta nothing," Shovels & Rope didn't have to adjust much to make the bigger venues their own.

"Almost every few shows feels like a milestone, at a certain point, because we're kind of in a growth period," says Hearst. "You know, you're playing all of a sudden in an amphitheatre and it's not even the first time but like, the fourth or fifth show in an amphitheatre. You get to the point where you're like, okay—I'm starting to get my bearings of the playing-the-amphitheatre vibe."

"I think one of the first times where we were thought, 'Well this is a big stage for little old Shovels & Rope,' was probably when we got the call to come open for Jack White for a few shows," remembers Trent. "I think that we got over that pretty quickly. 'Let's just do it.' People are always commenting, 'Man you make a lot of sound—it sounds like five people up there!' So we just... believe it."

Once you've seen this duo share a mic, swap a tambourine and spit storied banter on-stage, it's hard not to believe it, too.