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**MUSIC  
ISSUE**

EXCLUSIVE

*Charles  
Kelley*

On His Upcoming  
Solo Album

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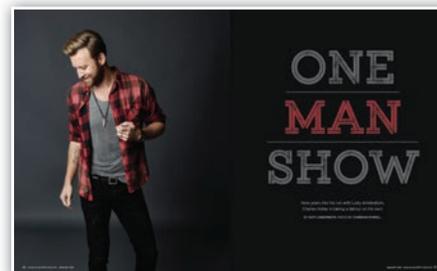
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This month's cover star **Charles Kelley**, shot by Cameron Powell, seemingly has plenty to keep him up at night—he and his wife Cassie are expecting their first child next month and for the first time, he's performing true lead vocals with an upcoming solo project. But Kelley is taking it all in stride.

"The only anxiety I have about this whole project is I hope the baby doesn't come too early and I hope my voice holds up," he admitted to content editor and music writer **Katy Lindenmuth**, who, besides working closely with this magazine, has written for publications including *Billboard*, *Country Weekly*, and *Rolling Stone Country* and worked for *Teen Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan* in New York. (For her full story on Kelley, check out "One Man Show" on page 56.)

Lindenmuth, together with *Nashville Lifestyles* digital editor and designer, and staff music aficionado **Valerie Hammond**,



also created and edited this year's list of artists to watch ("The Buzz," page 61). Our resident go-to music pros listened to countless tracks and considered dozens of artists while developing this year's list.

"It was a *huge* challenge because it seems like every artist in town is dropping new music next year," says Lindenmuth. "That's great when you're just a listener, but our list changed about a million times in the process." She's excited to watch Judah & the Lion take off this year, as well as Maren Morris. "She's been Nashville's best-kept secret for years. Reminds me of Chris Stapleton—and look at him now."

Adds Hammond, "The musical landscape reveals more and more soul and rock each year. I enjoyed catching a few moments with artists on the rise like Lauren Daigle; you can hear the passion in their voices when they talk about their art and what's coming next."



Katy Lindenmuth



Valerie Hammond



ONE

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MAN

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SHOW

Nine years into his run with Lady Antebellum,  
Charles Kelley is taking a detour on his own.

BY KATY LINDENMUTH. PHOTO BY CAMERON POWELL.

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Charles Kelley has been a dominating figure in country

music for the better part of a decade, bolstering the genre's reigning trio, Lady Antebellum, with his 6-foot-6 frame and soulfully smooth vocals. His band—and their brand—are unmistakable: poppy, polished, and PG-rated. Kelley himself, though, can't be categorized so neatly.

"There have always been songs that I've wanted to record that didn't fit the band," Kelley says as he sinks into a couch at Berry Hill's lofty White Avenue Studio. "What you can say as a group is different than what you can say as a singular person."

The Georgia native has never had much of a chance to speak out on his own. His career began in 2005 with that all-too-familiar move to Nashville to pursue music, followed by regular cowrites and gigs with a grade-school buddy, Dave Haywood, and a local singer-songwriter named Hillary Scott. What happened two years later was lightning-strike rare: The trio signed to Capitol Records and catapulted into a world of nonstop headlining tours, nine number one singles, and accolades ranging from CMAs to Grammys (they've got six and seven of those, respectively).

The final show of Lady A's most recent tour, a homecoming blowout at Bridgestone Arena, signaled two important milestones: Kelley's 34th birthday and the dawn of a well-deserved hiatus for the group. While Scott and Haywood are using the unprecedented time off to slow down, Kelley is seizing the opportunity to reveal his other sides with a solo project.

"Five records in, I feel like I can do it," he says. "There's been this pull of wanting to get back to more of the stuff I grew up loving, which is '70s Southern rock."

That throwback sound is at the heart of "The Driver," the—yes—driving single Kelley recorded last summer with Dierks Bentley and Eric Paslay. It's a wistful reflection on the circus-like nature of life on the road; ironically, he first brought up the track to the group as they were planning their break from touring.

"At first I think they were like, 'What does this mean for the band?'" Kelley recalls. "But once they heard it and recognized that it's different than what we do as a band, they didn't feel like it would interfere."



Charles (center) with Dierks Bentley (left) and Eric Paslay (right) from "The Driver" video shoot

Kelley originally intended for "The Driver," which he released last October, to be an experiment of sorts—a standalone single, a fun collaboration with friends, a step toward another side of the industry.

"Then I realized: Man, I'm really proud of this. I really do want to feel it out and make a full record," he says. "I thought, Maybe this is the time for me to do this."

**"THE BAND, THE CREW, HILLARY AND DAVE—LOVE THEM ALL. BUT AFTER A WHILE YOU'RE LIKE, 'OKAY, I JUST WANT TO STEP AWAY FOR A SECOND AND MISS YOU A LITTLE BIT.'"**

With his bandmates' blessing, Kelley shifted into full-on solo mode last fall. The project is fluid—there's still no definitive album release date or title, and several of his scheduled December tour dates were postponed with only a few days' notice. But despite all the unknowns, Kelley is reveling in his newfound role as leader.

"It's nice artistically to be in the studio and say, 'I like this song—we should cut it' or in a live show to go, 'No, I want to go in this direction,'" he explains. "There's something freeing about that."

And though he's billed as a solo act, he's surrounded on stage and off by an A-list team. He recruited producer Paul Worley and songwriter Daniel Tashian, rehired Lady A guitarist Jason "Slim" Gambill, and discovered a secret weapon named Abe Stoklasa—a cowriter of "The Driver" who Kelley says plays "pretty much every instrument." Their collective goal: to fill the forthcoming album with rock throwbacks that aren't straightforward hits.

"I love mainstream country, I really do, but I want that to be Lady A's lane," Kelley says. "I want to have country hits, but it might be more of a grind for them to become a hit because they're a little left of center."

Less than a month after those words left his mouth—and only two months after its release—"The Driver" was nominated for a Grammy. In the Best Country Duo/Group Performance category, Kelley & Co. are up against Little Big Town's "Girl Crush"—the very song that inspired Kelley to start writing what he feels, not what's fit for radio. He also recorded a track penned by Chris Stapleton, called "Lonely Girl," that Lady Antebellum had considered recording but ultimately passed on because it didn't fit their vibe.

"The main thing we were chasing was a certain spot in my voice that I've kind of gotten away from as our music has gotten more mainstream," he says. "This record is a lot lower, a lot grittier, more gravelly."

**“SOMETIMES EVERYTHING GETS SO CLEAN WITH LADY A THAT YOU DO CRAVE A LITTLE BIT MORE OF THE DOWN AND DIRTY. NOT THAT ONE IS BETTER, THEY’RE JUST DIFFERENT.”**

With each intimate show, like his sold-out tour kickoff at NYC’s Gramercy Theatre in December, Kelley is experiencing a rite of passage that Lady Antebellum bypassed on their fast track to flashy arenas.

“When you start getting to these big venues, it’s hard to personally connect with each person in the room and to really see their reactions because they’re so far away,” he says. “When you’re in a club, you can feel it, and see it, and hear it. There’s just an infectious energy that comes with everybody being on top of each other.”

As the main act, Kelley is free to roam the stage without distractions like production or lighting cues. He’s working out some kinks in his brand-new material, he says, but he’s not dwelling on any missteps.

“I used to be so nervous about messing up lyrics,” he admits. “And maybe that is part of the draw of doing these clubs. There will be nights where we fall a little flat on our face or moments where I mess up or we’ll try a cover and it won’t work. But it’s all part of the fun. When you’re confident up there and you’re having a good time, that’s all that really matters.”

While he’s still writing and recording with his longtime bandmates—and has gone on record saying the band is not breaking up—Kelley is basking in his solo work’s early buzz.

“I’ve always had this comfort zone with people around me and a band around me,” he says. “This is definitely putting myself out there. But I feel like the last nine years of my life have prepared me for it.”

**“IT’LL DEFINITELY BE THE MOST SINGING I’VE EVER DONE. I’M GOING TO HAVE TO TAKE CARE OF MY VOICE AND MAKE SURE IT HOLDS UP, BECAUSE I’M GOING TO WANT TO GO AFTER IT EACH NIGHT PRETTY HARD.”**

## For the Kids

**Even on hiatus, Lady A’s goodwill is in full effect.**

The baby boy Charles Kelley is expecting next month with his wife, Cassie, isn’t the only child on his mind. Founded in 2012, Lady Antebellum’s LadyAID Fund is a three-pronged nonprofit that supports kids in need locally, nationally, and globally. LadyAID has partnered with organizations like Monroe Carell Jr. Children’s Hospital,



and last year the band donated \$400,000 from their Wheels Up tour’s ticket sales.

“It’s always going to be something we’re passionate about,” Kelley says.



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