

Haley & Michaels

There is a rich history of duos in country music, but only a rare few have possessed both a musical and personal shorthand — the ability to effortlessly finish each other's thoughts, sentences and songs. For Haley & Michaels, however, it was apparent from their very first meeting in Nashville, over coffee. Although they didn't know it as kids, Shannon Haley and Ryan Michaels grew up in neighboring towns in Northern California. If there were ever a partnership that was meant to succeed, it is theirs.

And *Taking Off*, their new six-song EP, is the proof. This is a project borne out of that elusive shorthand, full of bona fide collaborations — not a lead vocalist propped up with harmony help. For Haley & Michaels, who spent last summer opening shows for artists like Sam Hunt, Brett Eldredge, Chris Young and Old Dominion, music is a true partnership, as well as an extension of their personal life: the couple married soon after that fateful coffee date.

Now, they're excited to share the entirely unique sound they brought to life in the studio: It's country music delivered with a certain amount of power pop. Bright and colorful, but also honest and probing, it connects the dots between Little Big Town's ethereal country and the hard rock of Queen.

"I listened to Guns N' Roses, Metallica and especially Bon Jovi, but my dad was a pedal-steel player and I grew up in a family-owned musical-instrument store, so the country influence came from there," says Michaels.

"And Sheryl Crow was my all-time inspiration," says Haley, laughing at their contrasting influences. "I loved Carole King, Bonnie Raitt and James Taylor."

But it was over country music where the onetime Sunset Strip rocker Michaels and the folky Haley connected. Especially via the songs of Garth Brooks, which married songwriter introspection with arena-rock power.

"Garth showed that you can rock out, but still sing songs about life and have depth in your lyrics," says Michaels.

On the EP's title track "Taking Off," Haley & Michaels do both. An enormous song that explodes through the speakers, it finds the couple trading lines in the verses and singing in unison on the chorus — and has all the makings of a summer anthem.

"A theme in our lives is having these different sides to our relationship, music and marriage. They often feel like individual things but there is a fine line that connects both," says Haley. "After getting married and getting in our groove musically, it was all taking off. There was just an energy we felt. 'Taking Off' is about finding your stride."

"Finding your stride is a good way to say it," echoes Michaels. "It's that feeling of a paradigm shift in your life."

"Drinking About You," meanwhile, is at the opposite end of the spectrum. Although it features its own driving, bombastic groove, it's as dark as the barroom in which it's set — it's a drinking and over-thinking song.

"Just because we're happy in our marriage doesn't mean we can't relate to every aspect of a relationship," says Michaels. In 2015, the duo made a high-profile appearance on NBC's *Today Show*, singing the gorgeous and deeply personal "Giving It All (To You)," essentially their wedding vows set to music. The couple, who notched more than 150,000 digital downloads off their first EP and received huge support from SiriusXM's The Highway, is proud of the song and included it on the new *Taking Off* EP, but stress it's only one aspect of their creative life.

"It's easy to get pinned as 'singers of love songs,' especially after our wedding song," says Haley, "which is why something like 'Drinking About You' is so important to us."

Likewise, "The Price I Pay," a break-up song that won Song of the Year honors from the Nashville Independent Music Awards. Haley & Michaels decided to recut their breakout ballad for *Taking Off*, resulting in another performance that showcases their commitment to being a "pure duo."

"That song is special to us because it is a template for how we arrange our vocals. We write as a pure duo and flip parts and who sings leads," explains Michaels. "But it was never that thought-out. It just happened that way and has become the template for everything we've done since."

"All Out," meanwhile, evokes Keith Urban's brand of adventurous pop-country and stands as one of the most dazzling tracks on *Taking Off*. Haley and Michaels deliver their vocals in a rapid-fire rhythm, with a wiry guitar solo holding it all together.

"This song is about two people making a commitment to something, but they haven't gone that extra mile," says Haley of the song's message. "Now they're saying, 'Let's do it.' I can apply that to our career and to our relationship."

With *Taking Off*, Haley & Michaels are committed to going all out, marching forward with a vibrant yet organic new sound, and a quality that is often lacking in today's country music: passion. It's a trait that is essential to the couple's creative shorthand.

"I want people to hear the passion in the EP, and the honesty," says Haley. "But it also has an . . ."

"Edge," finishes Michaels with a smile. "We're trying to push the boundaries in as many ways as we can."

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