

WISHING YOU A HAPPY AND SPIRITUAL CHRISTMAS

One of Dolly Parton's favourite duos, for KING & COUNTRY are back with a new Christmas album in 'A Drummer Boy Christmas' and explain to Maverick how it's their most spiritual record to date

Given everything that has happened in 2020, it is perhaps very understandable that there is extra significance and meaning for this Christmas, as people search for something that can provide some positivity and an escape from reality. At the best of times, Christmas is there for that – a time of bringing people together, a time for family, a time for hope – but it really does feel like it has deeper meaning this year.

It is also a time where artists try and bring some festive cheer by releasing a Christmas record of some description, as we often see within country music especially. This year though, for KING & COUNTRY have tried to capture that deeper meaning with 'A Drummer Boy Christmas' – their first Christmas record and one that brings with it collaborations with Gabby Barrett and NEEDTOBREATHE, along with a plethora of powerful tracks that drip with spiritual belief.

For the group – made up of Australia born brothers Joel and Luke Smallbone – Christmas has always been a very meaningful part of their careers, but they decided that with everything going on, they wanted to inject some joy, hope and positivity into 2020, while also explaining that the name of the album has come from a Christmas song that helped set them on their way many years ago.

"Christmas has in some ways been synonymous with the band from the beginning, as the story goes," Joel explains. "We made our first album in February 2012 and that Christmas for whatever reason – I think we were so eager as a baby band – we were determined we would do a Christmas tour, but we didn't have a Christmas album or a Christmas EP, we just shoved ourselves into an old factory for about 48 hours and came up with these Christmas renditions of classic Christmas songs. One of them was *Little Drummer Boy* and from that day to this, it's kind of been this song that has just held us in good stead.

"We're a rhythmic band and a very spiritual band, so you kind of put the two together and it makes a perfect recipe. Coming into 2020 with all we were facing both in the States and abroad – we had a tornado rip through our American home town and the political elections over here and so on and so forth –

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we felt as though 2020 came into view as the time for a Christmas album.”

Branching out

The album saw the duo bring in a new face when it came to the recording side of things, too. While they normally work with Matt Hales, otherwise known as Aqualung, they were introduced to Davide Rossi by their long term producer, who has worked most famously with Coldplay over the years. Rossi was tasked with putting together the instrument arrangements and orchestration for the album and the results are spectacular, with the pair admitting that they were blown away by what Rossi came up with and were very grateful to be pushed in the way that they were to get the record that they did.

"Both are remarkable folks that understand music at such a high level," Luke gushes. "Their compositions are always so interesting and so thoughtful and I think when we're

attempting to make music, we're attempting to make thoughtful music. That's always the hope, but we do live in a world where you've got to rush it out, get it done and hopefully it's a top 40 hit – but what we want to do with this Christmas project is we wanted to make something that at least sounds timeless.

"People determine that an album is timeless, but we wanted to make something that could live on beyond a few Christmases, so when it comes to people that you can collaborate with, I can't think of anybody better than Matt and then Davide. We started working with Hales probably 12 years ago, so he's worked on every single project that we have ever done and obviously now, an uncle, brother, whatever family member you want to throw in there – he's like that to us.

"He came to us with Davide and he said 'hey, I've been working on some side projects with this guy, I think you're going to really like him – he does great orchestration' and



we were looking at some of his stuff...he's a magician. So we weren't really trying to make a project, we wanted to push a little bit I guess and make something that was pushing us, sounding ever so slightly different and to try and make something timeless."

Setting the vibe

The 13 track album features 11 covers and clocks in at 45 minutes, but what the duo did have some difficulty with was narrowing down which songs to pick. While it would've been very much in normal festive spirit to try their hand at very jovial tracks, the pair felt that this would come across as out of touch on this occasion given everything that has happened in 2020. As a result of that, they looked at other parts of the Christmas story who are perhaps overlooked and also wanted to focus on key feelings that will help people get past a turbulent and challenging time.

"It came apparent coming into this year that Christmas 2020 is shaping up to be unlike any we've experienced in our life time," Joel says. "There's been such desperation, such loss economically, loss of human life across the globe this year as well, so coming into this idea of good news and great hope, redemption and love and so many things that Jesus in his documented life on Earth really stood for...I feel we desperately need that in this era.

"We kind of went down the list and songs like *Rudolph* very quickly got slid off, because it just felt - as much as we love the light heartedness - that it didn't feel like it was representing the state of where we find ourselves, in 2020. At that point, we drove very deeply into the more spiritual kind of Bethlehem and that side of Christmas.

Recording Academy gold

January seems a long, long time away now, but it was a month to remember for the brothers as they took home two Grammy Awards - one for Best Contemporary Christian Music Album ('Burn the Ships) and one for Best Contemporary Christian Music Performance (God Only Knows). Those two took their Grammy total to four and while awards aren't the be all and end all for them, seeing the joy on their team made everything worth it.

"We're brothers, we're immigrants and we've been in America most of our life, but there is still that international part of us that runs deep - British commonwealths, if you will," Joel said. "We are two of seven kids and when we moved to the States, we had nothing. Dad had lost his job, we raked leaves and mowed lawns and mum and our older sister cleaned houses. It really knit us together as a family in a really radical way, so as a result now, it is very much a family band.

"Luke and I are the ones out front, but our dad manages us, our brother

Josh is our General Manager, our brother Ben does all the visuals, our brother Daniel is our Creative Director and mum is the spiritual guide and the glue. All of us have those different parts and pieces of the story and then you take that wider to record labels and booking agents and our supporters and so on.

"I genuinely felt, for both of us, that these Grammy awards had felt very uplifting to the whole group and when you look back on what we have put into this thing and then you layer in another aspect of the whole intent of what Luke and I set out to do with music in the first place...we wanted to offer some encouragement hope, honesty and authenticity so you feel you are being doubly recognised for being true to yourself, which is not always the case in culture.

"I don't want to be bashful, but we both take them for what they are. However, the sentiment of what they represent for our family, our team and our supporters is very encouraging, particularly in a year like this. That's a very meaningful part, for sure."



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Coupled with pulling from a few other characters that are sort of notable in the story that don't get a lot of due diligence – for example, the shepherds and Joseph.

“The shepherds were the low lives at that time – they were the ones working the job that no one else wanted to do and yet, the first proclamation was announced to them, so we crafted *Heavenly Hosts* around that and it was beautiful. Then, this other character, right there alongside Mother Mary and the whole world, celebrates her and baby Jesus the whole world celebrates him. It's his stepdad Joseph who was really a very courageous man and that dynamic of him seeing his wife to be give birth to this child, who is not really his child, is just such an interesting dynamic.

“There was another song that we penned with Aqualung actually called *The Carol of Joseph* that we also felt – well – it's a hard thing to write a Christmas song as you are dealing with such nostalgic beautiful music,

but we felt in some small way we could contribute if we found an angle that not many people had taken before.”

Having faith

It is no secret that faith is something hugely important to the pair, with for KING & COUNTRY's Christian upbringing and subsequent teaching directly feeding into their own songs, thus making them powerhouses in the Christian music charts. 'A Drummer Boy Christmas' is no exception and in fact, the brothers believe that on this instance, it could not only well be the most faith related thing that they have done, but also the most spiritual as the pair sought to really try and capture a timeless sense of the positives of the Christmas time of year.

“I would say maybe more than ever,” Joel exclaims. “Each of our records have been this balance...we have both respectively got married though our career, as we were writing

FOR KING & COUNTRY A DRUMMER BOY CHRISTMAS

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A deep and very thoughtful Christmas record

Considering that the Christmas time of the year is so important to for KING & COUNTRY, you sense that it was extra important for them to get this – their first ever Christmas album – right. Something that gets picked up each Christmas and carries weight, not just for 2020. To say they have achieved that with 'A Drummer Boy Christmas' would be a huge understatement.

The collaborations here are spectacular – NEEDTOBREATHE's input on *O Come, O Come Emmanuel* is huge, while Gabby Barrett's vocals on *Go Tell It On The Mountain* are simply splendid. The record starts and ends in *The Bleak Midwinter* being sung over a delicate piano loop, both for the Prologue and Epilogue, while slap bang in the middle is the special *A Christmas Monologue*, which discusses the beautiful impact of Jesus before flowing straight into the colossal title track.

In regards to the original tracks, *Heavenly Hosts* is a masterful track, with the construction for this track absolutely phenomenal, while Christmas classics such as *O Come All Ye Faithful* and *Silent Night* are not only delivered

exceptionally, but also with a fresh twist. It is also noticeable how telling Davide Rossi's influence is on this record, with the arrangements very much fit for huge arena bands, while the vocals sometimes even make you double take as the melodies fit the arrangements absolutely perfect for Chris Martin.

When you take everything into consideration, this is not only an exemplary Christmas album and one that sets the benchmark for meaningful Christmas records, but it is everything the group wanted it to be from the moment they started writing it – timeless.



the first record I had a pretty serious break up and we've written a lot from the perspective of life and then there is faith and spirituality that is certainly laced into that as well, but it's always been a balancing act – life songs and love songs and then spiritual songs.

"This was the most faith filled spiritually led or spiritually dominant record we've ever been a part of. Taking other people's songs that have been written over the last few decades or few hundred years and filling in the blanks on our own and going, 'let's dig deep on the spiritual and the beautiful redemptive side of Christmas' – that's been really fun as well. The chances are it will go down as our most spiritual record that we've ever been a part of."

Collaborating with the Queen of Country

Their faith also allowed them to cross paths with Dolly Parton as well, who is a huge admirer of the duo. After Parton lent her vocals to *God Only Knows*, the track took off even further and the pair performed it with Parton at the 2019 CMA Awards as part of Parton's three song medley/set. The way that meeting came about though is incredible, as everything aligned perfectly in many different ways, while the brothers also stated that while it's said that you should never meet your heroes, Dolly is very much an exception to the rule.

Getting involved }

As the world is thankfully able to collectively get into COVID recovery mode and look to move on, it's perhaps natural that people will look to the arts to help get them through it – and for KING & COUNTRY will be ready for when that moment comes next year, with the pair set to do all they can to make it very exciting 12 months. "We started writing here and there this year and I just think there is going to be that theme change for the world as we go out," Luke says. "Even if it's just what are we dealing with here and the fright that everyone got with the pandemic taking grip, to how do we piece our lives and economies and our world back together again, we feel there is a real opportunity to play a small part in the piecing back together part. I think the arts in general – country, pop and so on – have a grand opportunity to be a part of the healing of the next season of humanity, so we are very eager to be a part of that. We've got music, we're talking about some film opportunities and we're not going away. We are certainly gearing up to be part of the conversation in 2021."





"I've not shared this with too many people, but we had a short list that I'd written down of extremely improbable prospects to sing on this song *God Only Knows*," Joel says. "One of them was Bono from U2 – we've been massive fans of him – and one of them was Dolly. It came about in a serendipitous way that two of her junior managers, I taught in Sunday school growing up and they are only a few years younger than me. I was in my early 20's and they were in their late teens and so we've all grown up and stepped into different avenues of music.

"Anyway, I called them and just floated the idea early last year – I said, 'we've got this song and we're more excited about this than any in our career, what do you think about playing it for her?' You feel silly, this is Dolly Parton, she's got better things to do, but we live in the same town in America, we live in Nashville, she has always had that spiritual side to her and it was a spiritual song, so we thought this would be magical.

"It must have been five days later, we found ourselves on a call with her directly and she said – as only Dolly could say – 'I just got to tell you when I heard this song, I thought it was one of the greatest songs I've ever heard' and if that had ended there, it would have been incredible, but then she showed up in the studio and put her voice to it and then she said, 'hey, I think we

should do a music video for this'.

"We had already done two videos for it – the original then a live video with this American alternative band called Echosmith, which Timbaland produced – but if Dolly says it, you do it! Then she was like, 'I'm going to be hosting the CMAs this year, I think we should perform it'. They say about meeting your heroes, but she would be one of those rare occasions where I would say, 'hey, you should meet your heroes'. She just went above and beyond every step of the way and took that song to another place. We were fortunate to win a Grammy Award with her on it, but she took it to a place that we could have never taken it on our own. I don't mean just success either – when she sings those words, it means something completely different to when Luke and I sing them."

A country standing ovation

Shortly after that, for KING & COUNTRY were back in front of a country music audience, this time for CMA Christmas 2019, which was broadcast on ABC. The pair performed *Little Drummer Boy* on the night and received a standing ovation for their efforts, which completely took the duo by surprise as they never expected anything like that when they initially wandered into that world of country music, with copious stars dotted around as well as a dedicated audience. However, they

now cherish it as a moment that they will hold dearly for the rest of their lives, treasuring everything about those seconds.

"I will be the first to say when we found ourselves in the situation of playing at the CMA Christmas and going, 'so they know we're not really a country band right?', both of us had this unsure feeling as to how this was going to be received," Luke shares. "We weren't sure how they were going to digest all of this and what was funny is the rest of the night was very kind of chilled acoustic guitar and I was like, 'all my fears were coming to fruition, yep this is what I thought – we're going to come in here with drums, blazing guitars and all this other stuff and everyone else is singing their beautiful and lovely campfire Christmas songs'. It was just very different to what we were doing.

"We got up there and everyone was staring at us playing this song and having been a performer for a decade plus, that can go two ways. That can go, they are looking at you like, 'oh my goodness, these guys don't need to be here', or they are looking at you and they are captivated and like, 'oh I love this, I'm just taking it all in'. It was one of the only genuine standing ovations that we felt like we were in a movie, where you've finished and there's a silence and then everyone stands up clapping. I think it's a moment for both Joel and I that we will never forget, because it very much felt surreal. It really didn't feel real, it was a very special memory."

With 'A Drummer Boy Christmas' now in tow, it won't come as a surprise to see for KING & COUNTRY earn many more standing ovations yet, even if they will have to wait a while until things come back to normal. But assuming we're clear next year, they will very much do their best to bring their spiritual and powerful Christmas music to a music venue near you. **M**

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