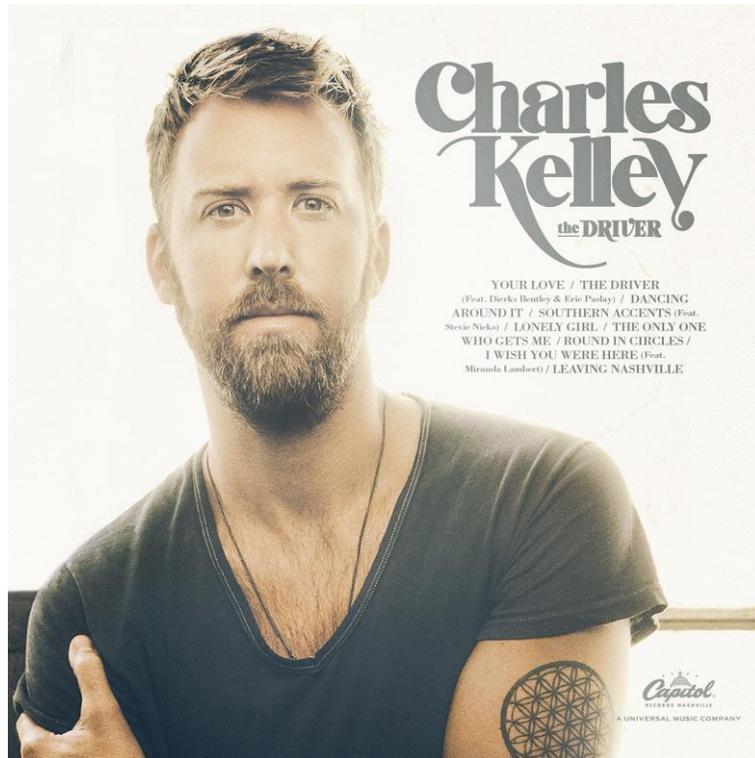


Charles Kelley *The Driver* Album Bio



It was December 2014, and Charles Kelley was getting antsy. His group—the multi-platinum, Grammy-winning trio Lady Antebellum—had released its sixth album, *747*, in September, and they wouldn’t be going on tour until February.

“It’s winter,” he thought, “I’m bored and I want to make some music.”

He called up producer Paul Worley and said that he wanted to try out a new song called “The Driver.” Kelley felt that it might be something special, but that it might not be a fit for Lady A; “the perspective seemed like a Crosby, Stills, and Nash story song,” he says.

So they set up in the “kind of ratty” studio in the back of Worley’s offices, just to see what happened. “We went in with no agenda,” says Kelley. “Maybe it’ll be the start of the next Lady Antebellum record, maybe we’ll scrap it, maybe I’ll pitch the song to other singers.”

But after a first session, the singer had a good feeling. He brought in a couple of other songs that he had set aside over the years and started sensing some momentum. What eventually emerged was his first-ever solo album, named *The Driver* after that first exploratory song—a project that’s picked up some extra wind in its sails as “The Driver” earned a GRAMMY nomination in the *Best Country Duo/Group Performance* category.

“I knew I wanted to go in a little more raw, gritty direction,” says Kelley. “I definitely had a sound I wanted to chase, getting back to more of a Seventies, Southern rock feel.”

The initial batch of songs gave him a sense that he was going to be diving into some new territory, with a real sense of range—“Lonely Girl” and “Your Love” both had something of a Hall and Oates-style white soul feel, while Kelley’s cover of Tom Petty’s “Southern Accents” had a stark and melancholy feel.

“At first, it was really weird to go in the booth and be like, ‘Where’s Hillary? Where’s Dave?’” Kelley says with a laugh. “But it was very exciting to be the leader in there and go, ‘This is it, I’m doing this.’ It took me out of my comfort zone, and as artists we sometimes get way too comfortable and start repeating ourselves.”

One thing that Kelley and Worley knew was that they wanted to push the actual sound of his voice back into a lower, grittier key than what listeners have been hearing from him in the group setting. “With the success of ‘Need You Now’ especially, where that song put my voice was a little sweeter than where it started,” he says. “When you’ve got three vocalists, a lot of time we’re each sacrificing our own sweet spot to find the blend. So I wanted to bring out that gravelly part of my voice, get a little bit of Gregg Allman back in there.”

Thrilled with the first studio go-round, they made plans to reconvene a few months later, after the first leg of Lady Antebellum’s Wheels Up Tour. The day before recording, though, Kelley had a sense that he was missing something; he called co-writers Abe Stoklasa and Daniel Tashian and almost instantly, they came up with “Dancing Around It,” adding a shot of sexiness into the mix.

The second session also included “Leaving Nashville,” an emotional powerhouse of a song about the ups and downs, heartaches and disappointments, of life as a songwriter. “It was something we could all relate to,” says Kelley. “Even the session guys said, ‘This is all of our story’—if you’re in the music business, one day you’re the king and the next you’re not. And after that song, I thought, ‘We’re probably on to something special here.’”

Three final songs were cut later in the year, which added to the album’s moody feel and personal focus. “Round in Circles” (with what he describes as a “cool, mesmerizing sound”) marks the first time that Charles and his brother, singer-songwriter Josh Kelley, have recorded together since Josh’s early work.

The last song recorded was a different kind of landmark for Kelley. “The Only One Who Gets Me” marks the first time he has written a song specifically for and about his wife, Cassie. “It’s a story wholly about my relationship with her,” he says. “Each line is so obviously about us—she tolerates me for who I am, which I know isn’t so easy.”

Though mostly recorded live in Worley’s simple studio, *The Driver* also benefits from appearances by a couple of Kelley’s superstar friends. He wanted a third voice on the title track alongside him and co-writer Eric Paslay, and thought Dierks Bentley might fit the track. “I love that really raw, weathered voice of his,” says Kelley, “and when he said he wanted to be a part of it, it felt like the stars were aligning for this project.”

“I Wish You Were Here” also benefits from the help of a guest. “Miranda Lambert came to a show and said she was proud of what I was doing,” says Kelley. “I thought it would be cool to get her on here—and she sounds like Emmylou Harris on this track, a very beautiful texture that fits so perfectly.”

Tom Petty's "Southern Accents," meanwhile, features the presence of true rock and roll royalty, with Stevie Nicks adding her incomparable voice. She and Lady Antebellum had performed together for an episode of *CMT Crossroads*, and when she heard Kelley's version of the song, she immediately wanted to contribute. "Just to have her say that she liked my version was enough for me," says Kelley. "You're treading on some sacred ground with Tom Petty, and his fans are pretty die-hard, but with Stevie in there, I figure they can't be too harsh!"

Another inspiration for Kelley was the possibility of getting back to a more stripped-down touring set-up. "Lady Antebellum has gotten so big that we're playing arenas and amphitheaters," he says, "and it's amazing, but as great as those are, I miss those dirty clubs and people grabbing on your legs and being able to see every face. In arenas, it really is hard to connect to someone way up in the nosebleeds. And you're tied down musically with all the videos and lights, so I'm really excited about being able to scrap the set list and play what we feel like playing."

Of course, Charles Kelley knows that he faces a very obvious challenge with *The Driver*—stepping outside of one of the world's most popular groups and getting people to accept him in a different context. "My biggest fear is being sure that the fans understand that the band isn't breaking up," he says. "We love each other and we're having a blast. This was just a pure musical left turn, to take myself out of my own head and bring in a fresh perspective when we go back in to make the next Lady Antebellum record."

"It's hard to break away from a group, for the fans to separate that in their minds. But the one thing I know I can do is lay my head down at night and feel like I've made a great project that I'm really proud of."