

WARD THOMAS

After making history with their second album, *Cartwheels*, Ward Thomas became the UK's biggest country act ever. We caught up with the twin sisters to speak about their unprecedented success and making country music cool again.

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When the Stone Roses geared up to release their second studio album, *Second Coming*, towards the end of 1994, the pressure bestowed upon them was nothing short of excruciating.

The release of their critically acclaimed debut some five years earlier had catapulted them beyond dizzying heights, and it acted as the perfect antidote to the bleak and desperate situations in which many people, especially in the North, found themselves in.

Despite eclipsing its predecessor's chart performance, the quality of content featured on the Stone Roses' follow-up buckled under expectation, and sadly fell victim to what we have since so frequently come to call, 'Second Album Syndrome' - the diagnosis given to a second album that underperforms significantly in comparison to the one that came before it.

Country-duo Ward Thomas, however, appear to be either immune to 'S.A.S.' or they are working in reverse. Their self-produced debut album, *From Where We Stand*, for example, failed to break into the UK Top 40 when it was released back in 2014. But its follow-up, *Cartwheels*,

achieved a chart position that no other British country act has managed to obtain since or before - No.1.

Overnight, Catherine and Lizzy Ward had gone from being two humble twin sisters, hoping to merely emulate the minor level of success they enjoyed with their first release, to becoming the UK's most successful and biggest country act ever. They'd gone from growing up on a farm in Hampshire on a diet of the Dixie Chicks, dreaming of perhaps one day being able to mirror even an ounce of their heroes' success, to making history with the very genre of music that they'd always adored.

After an understandably copious amount of screaming and jumping took place within the family kitchen, the pair celebrated over lunch with the two writers who they had co-wrote the album with. But they were more than just mere co-writers; they were the very influencing factor that helped to coax more honest and relatable songs out of the duo.

"We wrote a lot of this album with two girls of a similar age to us who also happen to be great friends - Rebekah Powell and Jessica Sharman - and I think that encouraged more

Photography by Zoe McConnell

honest material. So, I think the album may be a little more relatable to a wider range of people."

Unlike the duo's latest release, which was partly written in Nashville, their first album was composed when Catherine and Lizzy were still at school. As a result, it lacked the very air of life experience and lyrical maturity that runs throughout *Cartwheels*. But being more accustomed to writing about adult life wasn't the only thing that was different this time around.

The pair's ever-burning desire to experience different ways of developing their sound and methods of recording resulted in a conscious decision to record *Cartwheels* in London, instead of in Nashville where their first album was laid down. It was a signal of intent that was mimicked by their decision to team up with major label juggernauts Sony Music, in order to further their career and improve on the small victory they had with their debut. The label's influence and more pristine and carefully crafted marketing campaign, undeniably had a positive impact on the album's commercial success. But the operation was still very much spearheaded by Catherine and Lizzy.

"We were very lucky with our team because we still had a lot of creative control. We released our first album as an experiment and we were pleasantly surprised by the result. But when it came to the second album, we felt it was the right time to move up and Sony seemed to be the right choice for us - they gave us a lot of advice."

The success of *Cartwheels* was unprecedented, and it was an achievement that very few, if any, saw coming - not least, Ward Thomas themselves. In hitting the No.1 spot they had surpassed any previous chart performance affiliated with their country music peers and were quickly dubbed by the mainstream media as "Britain's first country stars" - a term that the duo admits "still feels strange" when they hear it.

Without particularly trying to become the flag-bearers of British country music, the Ward twins are now, by default, the poster

girls for a genre heavily rooted in American culture. A genre, therefore, that has always struggled to make a real commercial impact on the UK music scene. Arguably, its lack of appeal to the British public can be quite transparently put down to the fact that the themes coursing through the very veins of country music, have only ever touched upon the trials and tribulations of the very red and white striped nation that spawned it.

The likes of Miranda Lambert and Maren Morris have indeed bolstered the universal appeal of country music, but the rising popularity of repetitive, soulless pop music, in the UK at least, is sadly unrivalled. The charts are plagued with Brit school graduates and oversaturated with identical song structures; each artist plagiarising their own previous hit. For every single from Little Mix, there are ten from Ed Sheeran.

So, despite the occasional anomaly, the Nashville-originating genre can often only cling to the ledge of the Top 40 - in which residents often outstay their welcome - and dangle, hopelessly between 40 and 41, with little chance of climbing upwards to safety. But Ward Thomas believe that the British people's preconception of country music might just be starting to change - and it's hard to argue that they might have had a little something to do with it.

"I think people are generally becoming more open minded to country music over here. It has been a dirty word for such a long time, mainly because we weren't being exposed to the good stuff enough. I hope that we can bring a younger perspective on the genre that'll help boost its popularity with the younger audience in this country."

By adding a modern twist to the genre and not conforming to the stereotypically awful fashion choices associated with country music (you won't see the pair donning cowboy hats anytime soon), Ward Thomas have captured the UK's interest in country and have quite frankly, made it a dam sight 'cooler' than it ever was. But opting against riding horses whilst chewing pieces of straw in their music videos isn't the only reason behind their more commercial appeal.



Photography by Zoe McConnell

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"We have always felt that country music represents authenticity and genuine experiences. So, when we started writing we never wanted to write a song from the perspective of two girls born in Tennessee, as we weren't. We write about what we know and experience. I think that people can see through songs that aren't genuine."

Cartwheels is littered with lyrics that allude to failed, struggling or difficult relationships. The types of relationships that very few adolescents and young adults are lucky enough to avoid. Whilst some of these lyrical subjects are close to home, many however, act merely as metaphors for the changes and sense of uncertainty that both our society and world are currently battling; social commentary in the guise of stories about turbulent and bitter life experiences. Despite being advised by their mother to never speak about politics or religion during interviews, the pair assures me that such a rule ceases to apply when it comes to their song writing.

"It actually proves great writing material. We are very influenced by everything that is happening and the current issues. Writing these songs proves a great way to express difficult times that we witness others and each other going through."

As they head into album three, having just finished a successful tour of the UK, it's hard to comprehend the thought process of two 23-year-olds tasked with the responsibility of bettering a record that quite literally made history. But Ward Thomas aren't about to let doubt dictate their thought process or pressure stifle their ability.

"We will approach the third album the same as our second album. We will take our time and not release anything until we are really proud of it."

If their bout of 'Second Album Syndrome' is anything to go by, I think they'll be all right. ■

