

# OLD DOMINION

Albums are coherent statements about life instead of just a collection of good songs, in much the same way bands are forged and groups are made. Old Dominion – the 6-time and reigning Academy of Country Music, 5-time and current Country Music Association Vocal Group, but as importantly a People's Choice Country Music Artist of the Year nominee – understand both worlds.

As songwriters, they've delivered major hits for Keith Urban ("Wild Hearts"), Sam Hunt ("Make You Miss Me"), Blake Shelton ("Sangria"), Kelsea Ballerini ("I Hate Love Songs"), Dierks Bentley ("Say You Do"), Band Perry ("Better Dig Two") and Kenny Chesney (the three-week No. 1 "Save It For A Rainy Day"). As Old Dominion, lead singer/guitarist Matthew Ramsey, multi-instrumentalist/vocalist Trevor Rosen, guitarist/vocalist Brad Tursi, multi-rhythmic section bassist Geoff Sprung and drummer Whit Sellers bring all their influences into a sound unlike any in country music; but more importantly, they became a band through countless years on the road as friends first, business second.

*Memory Lane*, the full 18-song album, makes good on their chemistry and accrued experience. Measuring love when it's new, strained, falling apart and figuring it out exist on Old Dominion's most diverse project yet. And it's done without losing all the making-the-best-of-it positivity that's defined the 13-times Platinum – with two gold certifications thrown in – band.

Whether the No. 1 title track with its giddy-up beat of imagining what didn't happen, the slow burn sort it out "Can't Break Up Now" with double CMA nominee Megan Moroney, the moody acoustic femme celebrating "Beautiful Sky" with its luscious five part harmonies, the slip-sliding signature feel good "Ain't Got A Worry" and "How Good Is That" or the minor-keyed "Both Sides of the Bed," *Memory Lane* is a masterclass in how it feels to be alive, accepting and present.

Ramsey says, "We were on a call with the label, and they called our last album a 'passion project,' and I get why they saw it that way. But it's part of the journey: you do different things along the way. For this, we thought it's time to take all the pieces from the last four albums, take all the best things, blend them together and make something really special."

"There is the self-awareness that we are the ear-worm farmers," he continues, laughing a little. "We *do* know we have this ability to just throw in everything that can catch your ear without it sounding too cloudy or chaotic. We've really refined that, but that – if we're paying attention – allows us to go off in directions we want to explore, because the hook will bring you with us."

Those hooks have yielded nine No. 1s, including "I Was On A Boat That Day," "One Man Band," "Make It Sweet," "Break Up With Him," "Hotel Key," "Written in the Sand," "Song for Another Time" and "No Such Thing As A Broken Heart." With an EP of *Memory Lane* already yielding a No. 1, Old Dominion honed those "best" aspects for a more complex, but delicious-sounding album that explores being an adult without losing one's sense of embracing the best life possible whatever fate brings.

As Rosen says, "Some songs evolve, changing incrementally. It's the result of five individuals listening to each other and playing what comes naturally like a flock of birds. With each song, we

have our own mental concept of what the song is at its essence, but obviously with a shared vision. Whatever comes through us, through our instruments, that's a fusion of our musical DNA."

"Our band exists in its own lane in the country genre," Tursi continues. "I think that's one of the main reasons we have become successful. We just don't sound like anyone else, in my opinion. We're just trying to be ourselves, and what comes out, comes out!"

Or as Ramsey dials in, "Musically, there wasn't anything like us; maybe there never was. We're not traditional country. We're not pop-country. We always think we're a rock band, and we're not. But that feeling and intensity was something we've all had and loved."

The smoky "Easier Said With Rum," the code of dying fulfilled "Love Drunk & Happy," the sweeping, ultimate liberation being absolute commitment "Freedom Like You" or the banjo-flecked "A Million Things" that tags languid verses with its staccato, tumble of little things staccato chorus, it's *all* Old Dominion. Not only are they ear farmers; they create some pretty intriguing turns of phrase.

"Different About You" suggests more than all the things the singer *could* be, what he wants is to be the one who changes everything about the object of his affection. Misdirection in the right direction, that inventiveness continues to the arrangement, too. Even the guitars go unlikely places.

"It's sort of a nod to the Chili Peppers, but really a nod to Hendrix," Tursi explains. "That was the most transformed from demo to final recording. It's just really fun to play those double stop parts. Those voicings are built for guitar, and the song became way more aggressive. I always like when we get to go back to being the rock band we were, and always will be."

Rock. Pop. Country. Soul. A bit of classic singer/songwriter.

Even more so, it's what they share with the legions of people who've taken Old Dominion from a string of vans to headlining the nation's arenas. As Ramsey says of their one-of-a-kind connection, "People's lives are hard. We've learned we might provide a little relief on a not great day – and maybe bump it up a little on a good one.

"Our first album was a tornado, four days – and 'Hey! You have 250 shows!' We never stopped those first years, but it's the joy of creating this music and putting it out that people hear. We want it to mean something, too. Meaning something and feeling good don't have to be mutually exclusive, do they?"

From Ramsey's opening "*Strong is the way that I love her, truth is the way to her heart...*" on "Stay Drunk," it's obvious *Memory Lane* is a coming-of-age album for Old Dominion. With a wide-open arrangement and its string of emotional revelations, the idea of being drunk on another person becomes a profound metaphor for the way Old Dominion's music transforms listeners.

"That one's personal to me," Tursi acknowledges. "I started it late one night at my house. Then I pulled in Matt, Trevor and Josh Osborne to help me finish it."

"There's self-awareness musically, and there's self-awareness as a human," Ramsey picks up. "I think the jockeying is gone, and we didn't have that much ego (between us) in the first place. But it's disappeared with where we are and acknowledging of our abilities. The joy of creating something and putting it out, seeing how people receive it: there's a real freedom in that."

And that freedom allows for the flaws and the fixes. Just listening to “Hot Again,” with its carnival keyboard part and cha-cha shaker undertow, one roots for the singer trying to save his static relationship.

“We were having a meeting, trying to figure out how to get the momentum back we’d lost when touring just stopped,” Ramsey explains. “Our tour promoter said, ‘Look, we gotta get hot again.’ It was no big deal to him, like ‘You know what to do!’ And he was right: we do. We walked out of that meeting with a fire lit under us.

“But it’s life, too. Your relationship changes; maybe it’s work or life or kids or whatever. Maybe you wind up reading every book, trying to figure out how to make things better. That’s the point: you know what to do, you fell in love with somebody for a reason. So, let’s do it.” Let’s do it. Exactly.

Recognizing some people just can’t be tamed in the cautionary warning “Some Horses,” or the retro-vision recognition you can only smile about in the chiming “I Should’ve Married You,” it’s not always about settling down and happily ever after. That’s okay by Ramsey, Tursi, Rosen, Sprung and Sellers.

“I’m a flawed human,” Ramsey says. “And I can feel like I recognize everyone’s a flawed human, so why not speak about it? It’s all part of it, and it’s part of what makes life sweet. When I started down this road, a friend told me, ‘Matthew, you signed up for a life of service.’ To me, that’s telling the complete truth...”

Maybe that’s why over the last decade, and possibly not since Alabama, Old Dominion created a space where people come to be themselves, to be lifted up and ultimately to find the best part of who they are in a world that’s often less than perfect.

Ramsey flinches a bit at the suggestion, but concedes, “At the end of the day, what we do is ultimately the product of who we five are, but even more, who we are when we’re all together as one. Over the course of our career, I think that’s something that’s been refined – that the fans have responded to.

“I went to Springsteen on Broadway alone,” he continues, “just to sit there and take it all in. Bruce Springsteen showed me you don’t have to live it verbatim. Just really observe what’s happening, pay attention to the details, because the complexities and emotions from your own life can fit in other people’s lives, too. We’re all more the same than different; our hearts want the same things.”

*Memory Lane* is certainly built on that premise. Not sidestepping the lost moments or problems, it deepens Old Dominion’s gift of making great music that moves us through the day with no bad vibes.

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