

SPOTLIGHT



Chad Wadsworth

Bruce Robison, Kelly Willis

# KELLY WILLIS & BRUCE ROBISON

**When this roots-country couple combines talents, the result is magic**

IT TOOK SINGER-SONGWRITERS Kelly Willis and Bruce Robison nearly 20 years of marriage before they collaborated on a duets album, 2013's stunning *Cheater's Game*. "I always felt we were trying to be protective of our marriage," says Robison. "We finally agreed that if we were going to work together, we were going to do it the right way. We treated it like making a band—and that made everything new again."

The experience was so positive that the duo soon began planning a follow-up album, returning to Nashville to work with producer Brad Jones and several of the musicians who appeared on *Cheater's Game*. The result is *Our Year*, an album of sharp originals and several smart covers, including one that ended up on the record after Willis played a prank on her husband.

"At a gig somebody called out a random request that Bruce had never done before, but he played it like he'd been practicing, and he looked awfully proud of himself," says Willis, 45. "So I went to Twitter and asked people to come up with a complicated song that would be a surprise for Bruce if I knew it. For the next week, every time he left the house, I practiced 'Harper Valley P.T.A.'" At

the next show, Willis planted an audience member to request the country classic. "Bruce was like, 'Oh, I don't think we can do this song,' but I said, 'I'll try it.' Then I locked into it. That was fun for me," she laughs.

When searching for material, the duo isn't restricted by genre, as they prove with their cover of the Zombies' "This Will Be Our Year," which allows them to showcase their voices. "I see us as a harmony act in the tradition of the Everly Brothers and even pop acts like Simon and Garfunkel," says Robison, 48.

Willis explains the couple's creative process is largely based on something intangible. "There has to be mutual enthusiasm over a song," she says. "Then we try singing together to see if any magic happens. It's all about what happens when we sing." Both Willis and Robison—currently on tour and accompanied by their four children—have plans to work on separate solo records next, but their two collaborative albums have set a high bar for future recordings. Says Robison, "Whatever I do, I want it to hold together as well as what we're doing right now."

—Juli Thanki

