

TO  
HAVE  
*and* TO  
HOLD

First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes the banjo and drums and harmonies and Charlotte's next best music hope. But Matrimony sings much more than love songs

BY MICHAEL GRAFF  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS EDWARDS

Jimmy Brown and Ashlee Hardee Brown first met at The Evening Muse in 2008. Now, they lead one of Charlotte's hottest bands.



"The only plan we have is to keep doing what we're doing, to keep learning, and to keep being married," Jimmy Brown says.

describe what's happening between them, to describe how they feel onstage, or in the studio, or in their NoDa home, or wherever they are, as the centerpiece of Matrimony, a family rock band with natural harmonies and a banjo twist—a band which, armed with a record label and a new album, is poised to become one of the breakout music acts of the next year.

How do you know that'll happen? You don't. But do you really want to bet against love?

Besides, if you know Matrimony, you know that underneath the strings and keyboard and drums and vocals, the core is Jimmy Brown and Ashlee Hardee Brown. And if you know Jimmy and Ashlee, you know they're on a mission to make it through anything. Compared to what they've already overcome, the music industry would seem easy, a thin challenge. The rest of life is thick.

They met at a show five years ago, at a little local place called The Evening Muse, which sits at the intersection of North Davidson and 36th. She was in the back. He was a couple of chairs away.

That's where the magic appears to have started. The reality is, it wasn't just fate. Their story starts a few weeks before that, at a cabin in the foothills of the Appalachian mountains, with Jimmy leaning against a trampoline drinking a Coors Light. Follow the love back there for a moment. It was the fall of 2008, and Jimmy was in Lenoir with a few guys to make some music. He'd been living in Charlotte for a couple of years by then. After he graduated from high school in Ireland, he had the opportunity to move to China and work construction, and he took it. And then that job led to another construction

And if you know Jimmy and Ashlee, you know they're on a mission to make it through anything.

ing music. In crowds, she was quiet and shy, hiding behind deep, dark eyes. But onstage, she let herself be free. She was great up there, a little bit Southern and a little bit ... something else. Nobody was sure what. It takes time to find your sound in this world. This was long before she tattooed her dad's initials on her forearm.

They use the word magic now to



Matrimony may have a record deal and a nationwide touring schedule, but the band is most beloved at home. Last summer, the band set up in the corner of NoDa Brewing Company for the release of a beer named in their honor.

job offer in Charlotte, and he took that, too. He played music around town, and somewhere along the way, he met Jordan Hardee, and Hardee gave Jimmy the chance to go to the mountains and make some music, and Jimmy took that, too.

One night, Jordan and Jimmy needed a break from recording. They walked outside and leaned against a trampoline and popped the top on two Silver Bullets. "Cheap and cheerful," Jimmy calls the beer through a heavy, Irish accent. At some point in the conversation, Jordan casually said, "You should meet my sister, Ashlee." The words floated into the quiet mountain sky above Jimmy, and he paused, before laughing and saying, "Yeah right."

An hour later, he asked to see her photo. Jordan pulled up a web page with her picture. Deep, dark eyes. Something mysterious about her. Something he wanted to know. But Jimmy didn't say much more about it.

A few weeks passed. And then one night in Charlotte, he saw her for the first time in The Muse. She was in the back near the door. He looked over, and he saw his opportunity. So he took it. He walked up to her and introduced himself as her brother's friend, James.

He was 24. She was 18. She looked down and nervously turned him away, and as he walked off in defeat, she thought about what it would be like to marry him.

"LET'S GO UP HERE," Jimmy says, pointing to a rusted staircase.

The lead singer of Matrimony bounds up and onto the roof of the Local 506, a little music venue in Chapel Hill that has posters on the door and writing on the walls and Pabst Blue Ribbon on special at the bar. It's last July, and the band is in the middle of a quick, three-stop North Carolina swing from Wilmington to Asheville, before heading home to record a short promo video for a beer that's being named in their honor at a brewery in Charlotte. C.J. and Jordan sit on the brick ledge on the rooftop, and Ashlee and Jimmy sit on the asphalt surface, cross-legged. Ashlee runs a small stick in patterns in the pebbles.

For more than an hour, they tell the story of how Jimmy and Ashlee started playing music together after they met, how they first called themselves Holy Matrimony, and how Ashlee's brothers, Jordan and C.J., joined the band. (They hired bass guitarist Ethan Ricks last year to tour with them, but he's not an official band member.)

In June, they released their four-song EP, *Montibello Drive*, named for the street address of the Hardees' childhood home. More than 2,000 people crowded the Fillmore for the release party, and then everybody went to 5Church for late-night. A few days later, they went off to Tennessee to play at Bonnaroo, one of the world's most renowned music festivals. There, they had the misfortune of being scheduled to perform on a side

stage at the same time Paul McCartney was on the main stage. When their show was over, a crowd followed them off the stage, begging them to play more, so they set up beside a trailer and played a small acoustic set for a group of people who couldn't get enough, even with a rock-and-roll legend one stage over.

"I can't really put it into words how it feels, the way our band feels," Jimmy says while sitting on the rooftop. "I realize there's something going on that's greater than what I thought it was."

Just before they take the stage at the Local 506, Jordan goes downstairs and leans over the bar to ask for a beer. Jordan, who also started his musical career in church, stands more than six feet tall and has 60 tattoos and wears boots that click when he walks. He's a big guy in a rock band, but he shrinks when the bartender tells him the Local 506 is a cash-only establishment. He's carrying only a debit card. There's just a small space between here and famous, but the bartender still wants \$4, so I buy the beer for him.

"I don't understand what's happening right now," Jordan says. "One day, I'll look back and understand, but I don't right now."

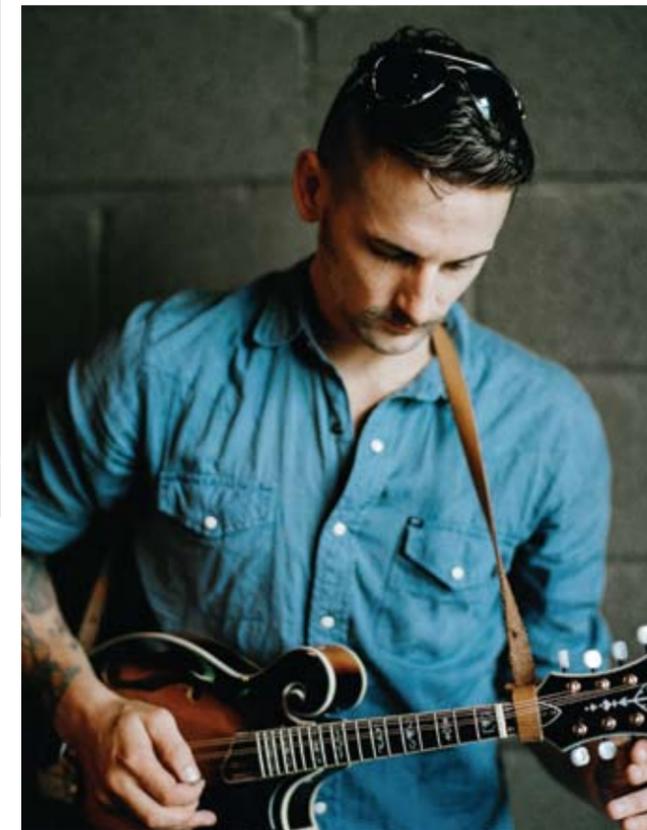
Then, just before 10 p.m., they take the small stage—the same stage where the Lumineers played in front of 12 people in 2011 before exploding the next year—and Matrimony plays hard for about an hour in front of a crowd of about 50.



Jordan Hardee (left) is the middle child in a family of five. Ethan Ricks (above) plays bass guitar, traveling with the band as the only non-family member.



They play what the song calls for: C.J. Hardee (above), the youngest band member, sometimes drops his banjo for a guitar. And Brown sometimes drops his guitar for a mandolin.



**THE NAME OF THE BAND**, they say, has little to do with Ashlee and Jimmy. Rather, it refers to the marriage between words and music.

On the *Montibello Drive* EP, she wrote the lyrics to two songs, and he wrote the lyrics to two. The four songs are a balance of Jimmy and Ashlee's personalities.

Jimmy wrote the lyrics to "Golden City" and "Obey Your Guns," two upbeat and more radio-friendly songs. The two Ashlee wrote the lyrics to—"Mecklenburg County Jail" and "Giant"—reach distinctly darker places.

They're scheduled to release the full album in early March, just before going to South by Southwest in Austin. The other songs—there will be anywhere between 11 and 13 total—take the same course, going up and down from track to track.

Their sound, they like to say, is "like a hillbilly Fleetwood Mac." Matrimony performed all of the songs from the full album while on a nationwide tour last fall, a tour so packed with dates that on one trip, they had to drive through the night from Cleveland to Charlotte to make two shows in less than 12 hours. The tour wore them out, and they got sick, but never of each other, and when they returned to Charlotte to play the final hometown show of 2013

in November, more than 500 people cheered them on for nearly two hours at the Chop Shop, with Jordan proposing to his girlfriend onstage, and Jimmy and Ashlee ogling each other the entire night.

Ashlee's voice is polished through years of training. Jimmy sounds more raw, but when they sing together, they melt into harmonies.

"This is going to be the rock act Charlotte's been waiting for," says Bruce Irvine, music industry veteran who's been the engineer and mixer for Anthony Hamilton's Grammy-nominated work in recent years. Irvine spent the fall courting Matrimony in hopes of becoming the band's manager. The band eventually hired him in late November, and he promptly laid out a two-year plan for Matrimony to reach national headliner status. "It's hard, when you live here and you know them, to really look at someone and say, 'Is this good?' But they're two distinct voices that work together. They can feel where each other is going."

In public, they are the picture of love—husband and wife and family and smiles. And a love story would be enough. But those lyrics, the ones in some of those darker places, make it hard not to ask: *Where did that come from?*

Few places in their music are more haunting than in the words of "Mecklenburg County Jail." In it, Ashlee tells the story of someone imprisoned. The lyrics seem to bounce back and forth on each side of the visitation window, and at

various points the main character could be either the prisoner or the prisoner's loved one.

#### EVERYBODY'S HERE.

His family. Her family. All 10 bridesmaids. All 10 groomsmen.

They're all on The Watson Stage, where Merlefest is held every spring in Wilkesboro. A three-piece band is in the front. Luke Skaggs, son of Ricky and a close family friend, pulls the bow across the strings on his violin. Every other groomsman walks down the aisle playing an instrument.

It's July 11, 2010, and this all is really happening, just like Ashlee always pictured. After the last groomsman and bridesmaid have taken their places, she walks down the aisle with her father, Rick.

At first, Rick wasn't crazy about them dating. Jimmy was six years older than Ashlee, after all.

Rick knew of Jimmy, through Jordan and music. Jimmy had even crashed on Rick's couch before the father knew about the relationship. The Hardees had one of those houses where the kids' friends always stayed over. And there was always music. In the basement of their Montibello Drive home, they set up a studio for the kids, and members of several Charlotte bands got their start there. On weekend mornings, Laurie Hardee would wake up at 4 a.m. to start making breakfast for her five kids and all of their friends.

Rick and Laurie had a love story, too. They met at a Bible college in Dallas.

They were 22 when they had their first child, a boy named Taylor, and they were hooked on having a big family. They had four more—Brooke, Jordan, Ashlee, and C.J. They raised them while moving from Texas to South Carolina to Virginia to Missouri, before eventually coming back to live in Pineville, near Rick's family in South Carolina, when Taylor was about 8.

The kids weren't allowed to curse or drink or even entertain the notion of a tattoo, Laurie says now. They all went to church on Sundays. They sang together. Whenever one had a loose tooth, one of the others would softly kick it out.

Rick built a successful masonry and concrete business, doing big projects. In 1997, they moved into the big home on Montibello Drive. All the kids had their own bedrooms. By 2007, his personal income was in the seven figures. His work afforded them the home, the studio, and all of those big breakfasts.

He thinks about all of that as he walks down the aisle—a father, considering what's behind him and what's in front of him as he drops off his youngest daughter to be married. Ashlee just looks ahead, waiting for the end of the aisle, waiting to stand in the spot next to her husband-to-be, surrounded by music.

**ON A LATE-SUMMER** afternoon last year, a storm is approaching, blowing a steady, cool breeze down 36th Street in NoDa, past the front patio of Smelly Cat Coffee Shop. Ashlee and Jimmy

show up together with Knight Lee, their 4-year-old dog—half-Chihuahua, half-Yorkie. Jimmy orders tea for both of them while Ashlee stands outside, twirling with the leash.

Jimmy opens the door, places the cups on the table, and then takes the little dog and puts it on his lap and starts petting its head.

For nearly two hours, they talk, sometimes to me, but mostly to each other, laughing and giggling throughout the conversation. It's often said of good couples that they can finish each other's sentences. Jimmy and Ashlee don't do that, but if you watch them, they communicate in ways that nobody else would understand, using only half-sentence whispers and facial expressions.

He has kind eyes, the type where when he talks his eyebrows dip more on the sides than in the middle. And he looks at her with wonder.

He loves to tell the story of the night he realized she was the one. It was a Super Bowl Sunday, and he was home in Ireland, and Ashlee was at her family's house. They spent three hours in their respective rooms, talking on the phone.

"I knew the phone bill was going to be sky-high," Jimmy says now. "But I was like, 'Screw the phone bill. This girl's awesome.'"

He says his idea of fun is playing golf by himself. She says hers is being around family. They are both incredibly skinny. A year ago, Ashlee became a vegetarian.

And rather than spend every meal eating something different from his wife, Jimmy, who was raised on fish and chips, cut out meat, too.

"She wears the trousers in the relationship," Jimmy's dad, Tom, tells me later, laughing.

Still, it's clear there's something more to them, and they start to unfold it as the storm approaches and the conversation turns to the band and writing.

He writes in the morning. She writes in the afternoon and evening. When he writes, he tries to recall those nights with his mother reading him Joyce and Yeats. When she writes, she tries to write about home. They both grew up in loving houses. They both like to be alone. They both like to be together. They both like to write about their lives.

"There's so many songs in the world already," Jimmy says. "If you don't write about something that's important to you, or important to everyone else, what's the point?"

Which makes me ask about "Mecklenburg County Jail." Jimmy points to Ashlee. And she points to the door of the coffeehouse where we're sitting.

"I wrote it right here one night," Ashlee says. "I wrote the verses in like two minutes."



Rick Hardee, the father of three of the band members, sometimes helps collect money from Matrimony merchandise sales.

**RICK HARDEE HAD CELL 16** in block 6300 of the Mecklenburg County Jail all to himself, with no roommates, and that's about the only good thing he can say about the place.

For most of his 21-month sentence, Rick was in that cell, behind bars and alone. He ate lunch every day with the same three men. He remembers two of their names, Pat and David. He doesn't remember what they'd done to be there, mostly because, "I don't think I was in any position to judge why they were there. I should've been smarter myself."

In the early 2000s, with five kids at home, Rick started to create tax shelters for the money he made by laying bricks around Charlotte. In 2005, he hired an accountant who introduced him to a man in Florida who restructured businesses. That man, Michael Beiter, was being investigated by the IRS. One day in 2007, officials raided Beiter's attorney's offices. They found Hardee's files and information. Four days later, they showed up at the home on Montibello Drive to let Rick know he was under investigation.

A long investigation followed. Rick hired an attorney in Milwaukee, an attorney whom he says "pissed 'em off more." It soon became clear he was stuck.

In June 2010, just before Ashlee and Jimmy's wedding, he pleaded guilty in federal court to evading \$1.5 million in taxes. He was ordered to not leave the

area while he waited to be sentenced to federal prison. The next month, he walked Ashlee down the aisle.

His company was hired to do a job in Wilmington, and he stayed there during the weeks, frustrating his parole officer. Then, in December 2010, he was arrested on a DUI charge and put in Mecklenburg County Jail. He stayed there while awaiting his federal sentence, which didn't come until 17 months later. He then went to federal prison in South Carolina to serve the remaining four months.

His children dealt with his absence in different ways. Some visited the jail more than others. The older two focused on their jobs and, in the case of Brooke, her family. Jordan racked up tattoos. Ashlee got one with Rick's initials on it. C.J., whose smile seems to stretch for miles onstage, was in high school at the time.

Rick's marriage to Laurie suffered. When he was released, they split up after more than a quarter-century together. Rick now lives just across the South Carolina line.

He has a salt-and-pepper goatee, a black T-shirt, and shorts when he sits down at Starbucks in Ballantyne with me last fall. He admits to doing something wrong, admits that he should've been smarter. But he also believes others—the attorney, especially—took advantage of him because he had money. He pauses when he speaks, often in mid-sentence. During one of the long pauses, a tear rolls out from underneath his dark sunglasses.

"It's hard not to feel like you failed," he says. "It feels like I'm not who I'm supposed to be."

Toward the end of our conversation, Rick says that he and Laurie are planning to sell the house on Montibello Drive.

"I really don't want to leave that legacy behind: Divorce," he says, emphasizing the D. "Hopefully, this doesn't affect their [Ashlee and Jimmy's] marriage. It is kind of ironic, though, isn't it? Matrimony."

**THE FOUR FAMILY** members in the band sit in the corner of NoDa Brewing Company, preparing to play an acoustic set. It's a Tuesday, and the brewery releases a small batch of new beer

every Tuesday. This week, that beer is a dry Irish Stout called "Obey Your Guns," named in honor of a song from the neighborhood's favorite band.

Ashlee and Jimmy live two blocks away in a small home with a nice front porch. Their house was included in their first major music video, "Golden City," released last summer. This neighborhood, this area, is their new home. It's different from Montibello Drive. South Charlotte homes have five bedrooms. This is a place where young couples get their start. They fit here.

They sing about this city in their songs. When a director offered to pay for them to fly to Los Angeles to shoot scenes for the "Golden City" video, Jimmy says the band thought, *Fuck that, we're doing it in our own backyard.* And they did. The final scene is of people partying and smiling in their backyard. The rest of the video was recorded on Charlotte's streets. It starts with Ashlee and Jimmy in their home, making music. They walk out the front door, and Jimmy hops in the driver's seat of a Ford Bronco, and he and Ashlee drive around to pick up the rest of the band members. C.J. stuffs his banjo in the back. Jordan walks out of Growlers Pourhouse in NoDa and hops in the back. That's where the line between fiction and nonfiction is blurred a bit: The Bronco is actually Jordan's vehicle.

"That's about the only thing that's different from usual," Jordan says. "I'd be driving."

Before the show at NoDa, Jimmy got a haircut. "I'm thinking about joining the Marines," he jokes. This is a small show, five songs, all acoustic. But everybody's here—family, friends, music. Rick and Laurie are here. So is older brother Taylor. Friends stand holding snifters of the dark beer.

Rick stands in the back, at a distance, but still closer than he was for two years.

Visitation in prison was on Wednesdays. Family members had to schedule around each other, because only two visitors were allowed at once. Ashlee visited more than any of the children. And Jimmy always went with her.

Less than a year into Rick's sentence, Matrimony met with Columbia Records



Jordan (back) and C.J. (left) Hardee consider Jimmy Brown (center) their brother.

and signed a record deal. Ashlee told Rick the good news through a prison visitation window.

The crowds grew, and the lyrics flowed. Ashlee penned "Giant," a darker song that explores the full range of the band's musical abilities. The song includes several full-on instrumental bursts and these lyrics—"There's a Giant leading me to God knows where; I got news I'm going my way"—and it became the fourth song on their EP.

It's the song they open with at NoDa. The opening lines are, "Does it feel good to leave me behind? Do you like the way I look when I'm crying?"

As listeners, we have a one-sided relationship with music: *That's what this song means to me, or This is how that song makes me feel.*

But music heals the musicians, too.

Laurie Hardee, the mother, watched it happen with Jimmy and Ashlee.

"They started writing together, and it was just an explosion," she says on the porch after the set. "It's hard for me to hear some of their songs. It's like a real family's real-life struggle. I felt honored by it, though. And it was just some light to pull us through."

Then she stops and looks across at Jimmy.

"I prayed for all my kids' spouses from the time they were married," she says. "But that man, Jimmy Brown, is a gift from God to Ashlee Hardee."

**ON A NIGHT IN** late September last year, Matrimony is back in town to play The Evening Muse. It's early in

their nationwide tour. Before this show, they were in Florida, and afterward they'll go to the Midwest, and later out west. They'll do rooftop concerts for various radio stations to plug their music. They'll record a song for the movie *Carrie*.

They'll do it all without a plane. In order to make the coast-to-coast trip, Matrimony rented a Mercedes-Benz Sprinter that sleeps five people and tows a trailer with all the equipment they need to make music. They alternate driving. They shower in truck stops.

But for this night, they're home. They'll sleep in their own beds. Jimmy and Ashlee live 10 blocks from The Muse. Two hours before they go on, a line stretches down North Davidson Street. People are crossing the street in front of the Sprinter. It's Jimmy's turn to drive.

The lead singer of Charlotte's most promising band can't find a place to park in his own neighborhood. He circles the block a few times, before finally getting close enough to unload.

His parents are in town from Ireland to see them play tonight, and again next Saturday at Verizon Wireless Amphitheatre, where Matrimony is scheduled to open a big festival called the Weenie Roast. The thing about being in the strange space between famous and not famous is that one week you can play in a place like The Muse, which stands only a couple of hundred people, and you can look out at all the faces of the people who helped get you here, and then the next week you can find yourself outside at a huge venue, with 48 giant speaker

boxes hanging from the rafters, looking out at thousands of empty seats and a dotted lawn, imagining what it would be like if it were full.

On the night of the show at The Muse, she's in a black dress, and he's in a gray sports coat.

The crowd starts hopping when Matrimony opens with "To the Road," one of its catchiest songs, then "Southern Skies," a song they say reminds them of home. "I'm not actually from here, but it feels like I am," Jimmy tells the crowd. "This is where we first met," Ashlee says.

They chose this as the place where they will introduce their hometown fans to a new song, "See The Light." They've played it around town before, but never like this. This will become the song that, to their surprise, is the highlight of the fall tour—a song that no matter where they play it, from here to the legendary Troubadour in Hollywood, people can't help but sing it back to them. Performed without percussion, the tune is all strings and vocals and passion. Jordan steps away from the drums and grabs an acoustic guitar. C.J. has his banjo.

They let the crowd know that the song is a work in progress, so be patient with them. They're not quite there yet.

Then they look out into the audience, at the mom who cooked those morning breakfasts, at the father who walked her down the aisle and then went to jail, at the Irish mother who still loves Yeats and now is holding a T-shirt of her son's band and a CD, and the Irish father who's holding a pint of Guinness. All the adults hold their chins high, looking up at the kids who will be famous.

And as they sing the final words in perfect harmony—"I keep on my way. I keep on walking my way. So I don't start losing my mind"—all of the men in the band sing so hard that their eyes close. Ashlee, though, grabs her microphone and points to the back of the room, where her dad is standing in almost the exact spot where she met her husband, and her eyes are wide open. 🍷

Michael Graff is the executive editor of *Charlotte* magazine. Reach him at michael.graff@charlotte-magazine.com, or on twitter at @michaelngraft.