

ninedays

By Ed Condran

Rock bands can have second acts. After taking a decade-long break, Sleater-Kinney returned in 2015 with the critically acclaimed “No Cities To Love” album. The band was re-embraced by fans. It’s a similar story for bands such as Fall Out Boy and Blink-182, each of whom hit the charts, took a hiatus and then returned for successful comeback albums and tours.

Nine Days is the latest band to enjoy commercial success, opt for a break, and then reform. The group, which was formed by singer-songwriter friends John Hampson and Brian Desveaux in 1994 in their native Long Island, struck a chord with fans and critics with the relentlessly catchy “Absolutely (Story of a Girl).” The memorable single, which takes Gen Xers back to another time and place, hit the top of the charts in 2000 and propelled the band’s major label debut, *The Madding Crowd*, to go gold.

“I remember when John sang the song for me,” Desveaux recalls. “I said, ‘that’s a hit song.’ I never dreamed it would go number one but it did. It set things in motion.”

When the band’s ironically tagged follow-up album, *So Happily Unsatisfied*, was mishandled and never released, the band hit an impasse and took a step back. For Hampson, it was the inspiration behind “Absolutely (Story of a Girl),” the girl he married, who reared her pretty head.

“Like many of my songs that ended up on *The Madding Crowd*, “Story of a Girl” was about my then girlfriend who wanted to get married and I just wasn’t ready. I felt unfulfilled and couldn’t take that next step,” remembers John. “But after going through that whole crazy experience together, I knew that she was the one who was always going to be there for me and we got married in 2001.”

After the follow-up album mess, the couple decided to move in a different direction. Much like Sleater-Kinney’s Corin Tucker, the Hampsons decided to start a family. “Things changed,” Hampson says. “I went back to school, got an English degree and we had children and I started to teach high school English.”

In 2007, Desveaux left New York for Nashville to embark on a career as a collaborative songwriter. “I moved here because I wanted to write country music,” Desveaux said. “It was what I needed to do.”

But, Nine Days never officially ended. There was still a story to be told. In 2014, Hampson and Desveaux, who have been in bands together since they were each 18, reconnected in earnest. The former flew down to see the latter in Music City to work together. It was just like old times and the tandem began working on a Nine Days album, but in a new manner.

The dynamic Hampson and Desveaux started writing Nashville-style in 2014, embracing the idea of working with cowriters for the first time on a Nine Days record. Keyboardist Jeremy Dean, a big country music fan himself, said, "I was really excited to dig in to the songs John and Brian wrote this time around. It was a new angle, but it still felt like us."

Working with ace tunesmiths such as Joe West (Toby Keith, Keith Urban), Bruce Wallace (Dierks Bentley, Trace Adkins), Phil Barton (Lee Brice) and Zac Maloy (Carrie Underwood, Daughtry), was "a fun, but daunting challenge", according to John.

"It was a steep learning curve when I went down to Nashville to work," Hampson says. "In the past I wrote exclusively through inspiration. I wasn't good at conjuring something out of thin air but the experience turned out to be really cool. It didn't take long for it to feel perfectly natural and unforced."

The songs, which are part of Nine Days' *Snapshots* album, were written relatively quickly. The latest batch of Nine Days material is familiar but there is a twist. "We decided to rock like the *Madding Crowd* days," Desveaux says. "But there is some new country sound in there as well."

There's no fiddles or lap steel guitars but there is more than a hint of country tossed into the rock mix. The amalgam works. "Greenlight", the new single, is a big, anthemic tune with pop-country flourishes that screams country crossover. "We totally went for it with this one," Desveaux says. "John and I wrote that with Phil Barton, a good friend and great writer here in Nashville. He knows how to write a catchy song."

The song "Snapshot" is an example of how the band has matured. The hook-laden cut is a look back at life through photographs. "You can tell a lot from a snapshot/ but there's nothing like living it/ Life is the stories we tell/ that you know so well/ looking back over your shoulder/ when we get older."

"That was one of the easiest songs I've ever written," Hampson says. "I wrote that with Zac Maloy and it just rolled out. I showed up to his studio with the first line of the song and my guitar and then the ball was rolling. It was the idea of looking back. Everybody has pictures, those family moments collected on the wall. It's a very relatable song."

That's a big part of what makes the album work so well. Listeners can connect with the material. "This album feels like a natural follow up to *The Madding Crowd*, but 16 years later," says bassist Nick Dimichino. "It has that big guitar sound with this more mature lyrical perspective. It feels like the perfect time for us to be creating music again, and for this record."

The members of Nine Days are older and wiser.

“So Called Perfect Life” nails the metamorphosis from carefree single to responsible husband and father. “There go my 4 a.m.’s with all my friends and the sun rising/ there go my guitar dreams, my fast machines/Maybe I was wishing for the wrong things/maybe I was seeing things the wrong way/ Maybe you’re everything I wanted/There goes my so-called perfect life.”

“It’s all about all of those fun things you happily give up for this person,” Hampson says. “The ironic twist is that I happily ended up giving up all of that for a particular person.”

But Hampson didn’t give it all up for the girl behind “Story of a Girl.” He’s back with his band. He’s even back with “Absolutely (“Story of a Girl”) - a revamped version graces “Snapshots.”

The second take on the number one hit is raw but also more fleshed out, thanks to producer Jim Scott.

“I was content to let the song exist as it existed,” Hampson says. “But we’re trying bridge this new record to a time that was 16 years ago. We decided to see how it would go. That song got us here. We felt like reclaiming it. “Absolutely (Story of a Girl”) is a gateway to this new record.”

Desveaux is pleased with the new take on the old song. “The changes to the song are great but what I love most is that John, 16-years after we recorded the song, still sounds the same. He did a great job and Jim Scott really helped us capture an edgier, more raw version of the song.”

“I’ve been a huge fan of Jim Scott for years,” Hampson says. “He’s one of those producers who lets the band sound like the band. He brought his wealth of knowledge of how to capture sounds. He urged us to try some things to get the most out of our band and the songs and it worked. He pushed us to make the songs even better and helped us make a great sounding record.”

“Jim really brought this whole other amazing perspective to the songs and recording,” says Dean. Dimichino adds, “When we walked in to the studio to track on day one in Brooklyn, he had the studio completely set up and ready to go. The very first thing we listened to in playback sounded so darn good- it was inspiring!”

The band spent prudently on its indie release. It’s very different than what happened when the band recorded *So Happily Unsatisfied* for Epic Records.

“About \$300,000 was dropped on that project,” Hampson recalls. “We were oblivious to everything. We spent a stupid amount of money because we could. Then our manager said, ‘I don’t think this album is coming out.’ I laughed it off. We just had a number one hit but that didn’t matter. We learned a lot and we’re better for it. Unlike that album, this album is coming out and you’re going to hear a different Nine Days. We’ve grown up. It’s a good thing for us and our music.”