

MAKIN' TRACKS TOM ROLAND tom.roland@billboard.com

Runaway June's Revised Lineup Moves Forward By Looking Back In 'We Were Rich'

COVID-19 has demanded a lot of reevaluation.

The self-isolation has inspired some people to take on new hobbies, taught entire industries how to work from home and reminded many of us to re-prioritize relationships with family and friends.

That kind of consideration caused a temporary crisis for **Runaway June** when original member **Hannah Mulholland**, who married Los Angeles-based drummer-cinematographer **Ian Jay** in October 2018, decided to leave the band and return to her native California as the pandemic unfolded. Her place was taken by vocalist-fiddler **Natalie Stovall**, who charted in 2014 as the lead voice in **Natalie Stovall & The Drive** before pursuing a solo career.

Runaway June's **Jennifer Wayne**, who served as a promotion representative when The Drive was in operation, officially extended the offer.

"When she first called, I was so thrown because it's such a left-field ask," recalls Stovall. "Artists don't get job offers to be other artists. That's not something that happens."

It was not the only coronavirus-related change to the Runaway June game plan. The week that COVID-19 was declared a national emergency, the trio's single "Head Over Heels" was at No. 43 on the Country Airplay chart dated March 14. The band and Wheelhouse stopped working it.

"Overnight, that song became irrelevant," says lead singer **Naomi Cooke**. "For a song called 'Head Over Heels,' literally no one could head over anywhere."

In its place, the entire team focused on "We Were Rich," a song that reexamines family and priorities conveyed by an adult protagonist who has risen above meager financial roots but values the innocence of those wonder years more than her accomplishments. As it turned out, it was Stovall's favorite song on the band's 2019 debut album, *Blue Roses*. To update the recording, Mulholland's vocals were stripped out; Stovall overdubbed a new alto voice and added light fiddle in a self-isolated session with a single engineer.

"That was the first time I really got to, quote, sing with the girls," says Stovall. "It felt so natural. I love the sound of our voices together, and I am just so thankful that this gift was dropped into my lap in the middle of the world pandemic."

"We Were Rich" fell into the laps of the songwriters — **Nicolle Galyon** ("Automatic," "Tequila"), **Ashley Gorley** ("Hard To Forget," "Dirt on My Boots") and **Ross Copperman** ("Nobody but You," "I Lived It") — during a December 2015 appointment. They had started a different uptempo song, and in the middle, began pursuing another track simply titled "Rich," but the lighter approach they were using kept falling flat.

"I do remember Ashley just going, 'What's the most meaningful way that we can do this?'" says Galyon. "Once we allowed ourselves to go there, we locked into something that we felt mattered immediately."

It became "We Were Rich," a montage of childhood images — including a one-bathroom house, spare change under the sofa cushions, KOA camping trips and Daddy's lone paisley tie — that fed into a gentle message about money, social status and love.

"I just loved the whole [idea]: We had everything we needed; it wasn't about money or things," says Copperman. "You're just describing this kind of simple childhood where money was not abundant."

It skirts modern songwriting techniques, waiting over 70 seconds to arrive at the chorus, though it does drop the title in at the 36-second mark.

"That's what kind of saved us," says Gorley. "We just did what felt good with this one. These kinds of songs, the rules usually go out the window and

they just say what they want to say."

The message reaches its apex at the setup before the end of the chorus: "I never thought the grass was greener/On the other side of our chain link fence." Not only is chain link a cheaper form of neighborhood borders, it really does allow people to see if the other side has greener grass — or dirt, or weeds. The next line reminds the listener, "Yeah, we were rich."

"All of these things in this song are about physically being together, which I don't think we ever really talked about," says Galyon. "But you can't really do a lot of these things remotely. You have to do them with the people, in person."

It took at least two sessions to finish, mostly because they had so many vignettes that it was difficult to edit it down. Galyon sang the demo, built around an arpeggiated guitar and a descending, three-note instrumental hook that fills in gaps between stanzas. All of the writers believed they had written something special, which led to frustration as over two years passed without a serious nibble.

"The song had been sitting around for forever, and me and Ashley were always just baffled," recalls Copperman.

Finally, it found a home when Runaway June heard it during a face-to-face pitch meeting with a publisher near the end of recording *Blue Roses*.

"It's like being in a perfume store after a while," says Cooke of those appointments. "Everything smells the same. After you hear a hundred songs, it's a little disorienting, but this song was just such a standout. Literally everyone in the room felt transported back to their childhood, back to that KOA and back to that old house, pulling cushions off the couch and finding change. It was so powerful. We were all crying."

Runaway June asked Copperman to take the reins on the master version, and he assembled a band at **Zac Brown's** Southern Ground Studios, with **Dan Dugmore** spreading steel guitar tones over the track, propelled by guitarist **Ilya Toshinsky's** rendition of the original arpeggiation.

"Ilya really drove that session," says Wayne.

Runaway June's three-part harmony, judiciously placed to take advantage of the song's minimal chord changes, gave "We Were Rich" a new, sisterly sensibility.

"If you're singing it by yourself, you're singing your story," says Wayne. "But when there's three voices singing the song, it's almost like all three of us are remembering our childhood together. I feel like that's a really, really special thing."

Wheelhouse issued the new version featuring Stovall to country radio via PlayMPE on June 12, just a week or two after paperwork for the new lineup was completed. The song's nostalgic elements mimic some of the experiences adults are having in a lockdown in which most entertainment is recycled.

"If you're watching things on TV, it's usually reruns," says Gorley. "If it's sports, then it's stuff that happened 20 years ago. People are having time, they're going through their phones. All of a sudden I'll send my wife something with the kids from 10 years ago. It takes us back on a good, cool trip."

"We Were Rich" entered the Country Airplay chart dated July 11 at No. 58 and moves to No. 55 in week two, perhaps offering simple wisdom to a national debate about how best to balance financial concerns against family and health. That makes the song's familiar images and familial message a reassuring salve for a difficult era.

"People want to escape what we're going through right now," says Cooke. "Maybe the healthiest way to do that is to go back to a happy time in our minds." ●

