

DIAMOND RIO

GREATEST HITS II

Thousands of musicians are vying at any given time for a glimmer of success. For most, just one hit record would fulfill a lifetime of dreams, which makes Diamond Rio's accomplishments all that more significant. Fifteen years ago, they too were hoping for that one hit. When the band released its debut single, "Meet In The Middle," they kept their fingers crossed that it would reach country music's Top 20—maybe even the Top 10.

That wasn't enough: The song went all the way to #1, making them the first country group in history to top the chart with a debut single. They piled on enough successive hits to warrant a Greatest Hits album and now, 15 years into their career, Diamond Rio has taken that trip up the national charts so many times that the band is looking at... gulp... Greatest Hits II, a landmark that seems almost insane when the band reflects on the odds.

"Sometimes you can't believe we've done so much," bass player Dana Williams marvels, recalling that not so long ago, he and his five band mates were among those thousands vying for that one glimmer of success. "It pretty well blows your mind."

Diamond Rio has indeed accomplished much. In addition to two compilations worth of hits, they have achieved gold or platinum sales with each of their studio albums, racked up 13 Grammy nominations, 15 consecutive Country Music Association nominations for Vocal Group of the Year, more than any country group in CMA history, two-time Academy of Country Music and four-time CMA Vocal Group of the Year.

Greatest Hits 2 provides a real opportunity to reflect on the band's journey. With the emotional "One More Day," the sonically inventive "Beautiful Mess," the lively "Unbelievable" and the poignant "I Believe" leading the way, the album features some of the most identifiable material of the last decade—in part because Diamond Rio is so unique and non-conformist in its approach.

Further supporting that non-conformity is the inclusion of not one, not two—but four new songs adding to its legacy of stringent quality: the thoughtful "God Only Cries," the outrageous "Redneck Love Gone Bad," the personal "In God We Still Trust" and the intensely moving "Over You." Ranging from the latter's pop chords to the former's strident twang, the new songs underscore Diamond Rio's ability to craft a consistent sound from a versatile body of work.

"We've cut things that were way out of the box or outside of our comfort zone, because the groove was more R&B," keyboard player Dan Truman observes. "But in doing that, we've learned that you put our voices and our instruments together and it sounds like us."

This guarantees that they sound like no one else and no one else can sound like them. Diamond Rio is certainly a country band. But one that straddles a fine line while defying tradition. The group's bluegrass-tinged harmonies are simultaneously bittersweet and edgy, its choice of subject matter is both mature and risky, and its insistence on playing its own instruments instead of farming the recording chores out to studio musicians is—in the country community, anyway—brazenly anti-establishment.

Diamond Rio is, in effect, a family-friendly group of guys with a trailblazing-rock-band mentality.

That's a natural progression for six friends who tackled an unpredictable career in close quarters—first in a van as one of those faceless thousands trying to get noticed, then as an established act traveling in a bus and struggling to continually live up to—and exceed—the expectations created by its initial success.

"We were a band first, and if we had a record deal or not didn't change who we were," lead singer Marty Roe notes. "That's really how we've always been—and will be. We love playing our music together, and I think we'll be doing this a long time from now, because we feel it's special."

Though country fans have appreciated that for 15 years, the band's history actually goes even farther back. Diamond Rio's lineup started coming together when Truman and Roe joined the band in 1984. Guitarist Jimmy Olander climbed aboard a year later, followed by mandolinist Gene Johnson, whose tenor harmonies—honed during a period when he worked with Keith Whitley as a member of J.D. Crowe's bluegrass ensemble—helped solidify the singular Rio vocal texture. Rock-bred drummer Brian Prout joined soon after, and bass player Dana Williams completed the lineup in 1989, his own blood connection to The Osborne Brothers providing a perfect complement to Johnson's tenor and creating one of the most searing harmonic sounds in the business.

"You can pick Gene out and you can pick Dana out because their voices do not exactly follow how I sing," Roe says, in admiration. "They've got their own stylizations and I believe that makes the three-part harmony thing jump out at you."

Once Williams rounded out the group, they were spotted and signed by record executive Tim DuBois in May 1989, the very month he opened the doors for Arista Records' country office. That career step was significant, but it was almost immediately undermined. Olander discovered he had a tumor, Johnson was injured while doing some carpentry to pay the bills, and Williams was seriously hurt in a boating accident.

They pulled through all those potential pitfalls, but it made the band realize just how tenuous their career—and their lives—could be. In addition, shortly after the release of their first single, they found out that a business associate had tuberculosis. Moved by those events, they vowed that their future successes would come full-circle. In the summer of '91, with just one hit behind them and plenty of newfound responsibilities, they made a place in their schedule for a charity golf tournament in Nashville and were encouraged when they could give a little over \$10,000 to someone in need.

That initial investment of time grew into an annual tradition, enhanced years later when Arby's offered corporate muscle in creating the Arby's Charity Tour hosted by Diamond Rio. The band now turns over checks exceeding \$250,000 each year to Big Brothers Big Sisters of Middle Tennessee.

"We felt very lucky and very blessed to be having hits on the radio and felt immediately that we need to give back," Johnson explains. "We don't just assume that our success is a gift to us. We try to spread it around to the community."

That kind of selflessness has become a hallmark of Diamond Rio—not only in its charity work but in its signature sound and its inner workings. Where most groups endure lineup changes and public rumblings of unhappiness, there's never been a hint of discontent from any of the six band members.

"Part of what's given us our longevity is that we not only respect each other for what we contribute to this band professionally and musically, we also respect each other's personal lives," Prout explains. "We don't spend an awful lot of time together away from the band. We all kind of hibernate with our own families and our own circle of friends, so we're not so sick of each other."

"When we do get together, everybody really wants to be there," says Olander.

One reason for that remarkable development is that individual members respect each other as partners of this team. The band's musicians have all relegated their own playing to some degree for the welfare of the whole. Prout has been approached by competing studio drummers for hints about specific sounds he introduced to the genre. Truman has subjugated his jazz and symphonic background for less complicated textures, Johnson applies a quiet minimalism to the mandolin, and Olander—whose burly Taxicaster adds another identifiable element to the band—trots his award-winning runs out only at the most judicious moments.

They have enough ability as individuals that four members have earned Musician of the Year nominations from the Academy of Country Music, but they've chosen to put the spotlight not on themselves but on the material.

And that material is often risky. They have their share of barnburners—particularly the catchy “Unbelievable”—but the thematic depth that underscores many of their songs is particularly apparent on Greatest Hits 2. They cover aging in “Wrinkles,” spirituality in “I Believe” and alcoholism in “You’re Gone,” while “One More Day” has been used by the public as a tribute ever since the events of 9/11. Most of those topics are viewed as a “hard sell” in the business, but Diamond Rio revels in such meaty lyricism, considering it the connective tissue between the band and the listener.

“When we went to record our first album, I probably put a little too much emphasis on it and the thought that we were going to change the world with our music—somebody’s going to hear a song of ours and world peace was going to break out,” Roe laughs. “Over time, you definitely learn that it’s not that way, but every now and then it sure is nice to have a song like an ‘I Believe’ or a ‘One More Day’ that people take to heart. It might not become a life-changing event, but it says something that helps them through a tough time.”

Diamond Rio clearly weathered the tough times at the beginning of their journey, and the band has applied a no-nonsense, all-for-one mentality that’s shown itself in both a quiet daring and an admirable consistency. That’s especially obvious with the release of Greatest Hits 2, an album that highlights their uniqueness while stretching from that founding hit, “Meet In The Middle,” through their 15-year journey.

The four new titles promise that the journey isn’t over.