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(11/17): <http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/country/7580559/thomas-rhett-knows-its-wife-lauren-who-is-the-star-of-the-show>



It's probably fair to consider "Star of the Show" to be a social statement about a personal matter. Thomas Rhett wrote it about his wife, Lauren Gregory, in October 2012, when he still riding high over their wedding that same month.

But if it weren't for social media, that personal song might never have been cut at all. Fans posted videos of him performing "Star" on YouTube and publicly shared their enthusiasm about it getting recorded. Their interest in the song was key in "Star of the Show" staying on Rhett's radar, and those videos that captured the performances were important because he had never made a demo, and the work tape from the writing session disappeared long ago.

"It had never been recorded, period," says Rhett. "Literally all that existed of the song was a YouTube clip."

Well, several YouTube clips, actually. Shortly after it was written, Rhett started playing "Star of the Show" in radio conference rooms during promotion tours and tour dates. A Nov. 5, 2012,

performance in Patchogue, N.Y., is believed to be the song's public debut. He revisited it the next night in Huntsville, Ala., and two videos capture him singing it Jan. 19, 2013, in Milwaukee. Those early outings created a buzz for the song, though he quickly replaced it in his set list with music from his debut album.

"I was in way more of a rock phase at that point," says Rhett. "I was working with [producer] Jay Joyce (Eric Church, Little Big Town), and that song just didn't fit at that time."

"Star of the Show" did reflect his relationship, though. Rhett saw other guys look at his wife when they went out in public. In a lesser man, those sorts of incidents can trigger jealousy. For Rhett, it was simply a confirmation of his good fortune.

"I went to Puckett's Grocery out in Leiper's Fork, Tenn., and I was doing a songwriter's round out there," he recalls. "I remember walking through the bar, and Lauren was wearing like a T-shirt and jeans — nothing fancy or special — and I remember people looking at her, and me looking at her thinking, 'Why do you look so amazing and you don't do anything?' I want to say that the idea spurred from that."

Rhett wrote "Star of the Show" with his father, songwriter Rhett Akins ("I Know Somebody," "Just Gettin' Started"), and Ben Hayslip ("Huntin', Fishin' and Lovin' Every Day," "Honey Bee") at the Music Row office of Hayslip's publisher, THiS Music. While Lauren was clearly Rhett's muse that day, the other two writers didn't necessarily have her front of mind.

"First love song ever from a father-in-law to his daughter-in-law," says Akins sarcastically. "I don't think we just sat around and talked about her all day —at least, me and Ben didn't. We were drawing references from our past. It was more about writing a song about a girl everyone pays attention to."

The first verse put the couple on the street with other guys paying close attention. The character in the song is practically entertained by the woman's lack of awareness: "You're so pretty and you ain't even got a clue."

In the second verse, they wander into a bar, where she literally becomes the star of the show: "Even the band seems to sing for you." The bartender likewise gives her her drinks for free, setting up an opportunity for the guy in the song to show what he's made of. In this case, the character stands back and laughs, though it doesn't always work out that way in real barroom scenarios.

"I do know guys that would walk straight to the bartender and tell him off and be a jerk," says Akins. "Thomas Rhett is definitely that guy [in the song]. He loves it when Lauren gets all the attention, and the song definitely represents how he feels about her."

While there was fan interest in him cutting it, “Star of the Show” didn’t make Rhett’s rock-textured debut album, and he simply forgot about it when it came time to record his sophomore album, *Tangled Up*. Plus, he had a newer song about Lauren on that project — “Die a Happy Man,” written in January 2015, more than two years after “Star of the Show” was created. That song, of course, was a watershed for Rhett, spending 17 weeks at No. 1 on Hot Country Songs and winning single of the year at the Nov. 2 Country Music Association Awards.

*Tangled Up* sold well enough that the RIAA certified it platinum, and Valory decided it warranted a deluxe edition with extra songs. That provided an opening for “Star of the Show.”

“We were just like, ‘Well, what of my old catalog would work?’ ” recalls Rhett. “Randomly, ‘Star of the Show’ popped into my head, and I was watching all the YouTube videos going, ‘We have to cut this song.’ ”

Similarities quickly sprouted between “Die” and “Star.” Both, of course, were inspired by Lauren, and Rhett knew that he wanted a Telecaster to set the tone in “Star,” just like its predecessor, though “Star of the Show” took a breezier emotional stance. “It is the happy version, the non-minory version of ‘Die a Happy Man,’ ” offers Rhett.

Rhett put his voice on a work tape (this one did not disappear) and sent it to California-based producer Joe London (Jason Derulo, Fifth Harmony), who co-wrote “Die a Happy Man.” London and Julian Bunetta (One Direction, Colbie Caillat) built tracks, and Rhett spent a day with them in the studio. That version incorporated programmed percussion, a shimmering guitar line at the end of the chorus and a layer of steel guitar, courtesy of former Dwight Yoakam sideman Skip Edwards.

“He put all this cool, swoopy, old ’70s-sounding steel on it,” says Rhett.

Several tracks were in contention for a single, with none of them taking a clear lead. But Valory execs hadn’t heard “Star.” Akins encouraged Rhett to send the rough mix to Big Machine Label Group president/CEO Scott Borchetta, and that made the decision easy. Just minutes after he sent the track, Rhett got a text back with a flashing star GIF that proclaimed “Star” as the next single.

That said, the roughs needed a little cleanup. Rhett went in with producer Jesse Frasure to cut his final vocal, and Borchetta brought in producer Dann Huff (Keith Urban, Brantley Gilbert) to do some revisions. They specifically asked him to handle the Telecaster part, as he did in “Die a Happy Man,” and he threw in some other stringed instruments to fill out the fluttery chorus-ending section. Huff also hired a live drummer to humanize the percussion.

“The key was how to integrate that with the beats that were on the track, because there was a real compelling element about what was handed to me,” says Huff. “So I went in with Thomas’ drummer, Chris Kimmerer, and we kind of massaged that.”

Mixing engineer Justin Niebank (Vince Gill, Eli Young Band) replayed the bass part, too, delivering an end product that has just enough elements of the “Happy Man” feel to make “Star” seem like a cheery sequel.

“It is the same food group,” allows Huff.

“Star of the Show” shipped to radio via PlayMPE on Sept. 30 and is already No. 14 on both Country Airplay and Hot Country Songs after seven weeks. In the process, the social and personal pieces are fitting together nicely.

“I love that my fans are cool with me being lovey-dovey about my wife rather than pretending that I’m single and trying to act all sexy onstage,” says Rhett.

Plus, the early success of “Star” suggests another personal highlight could well be on the horizon.

“Me and Dad have had success together before, but never on a song that I have put out as an artist,” says Rhett. “So if this song goes to the top of the chart, that’ll be a new milestone for me and my dad.”