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We talk to the young country star about his early success and how he plans to keep it going. Also, **GQ** has the exclusive premiere of his new song "Craving You."

Thomas Rhett doesn't want to hear it. As the country star sees it, his fellow twentysomething male country artists—the Florida Georgia Lines and Sam Hunts of the world, singers like him who (perhaps unfairly) get lumped into the tailgates-and-truck beds “bro country” set—may claim to not care what arrows the Internet commentariat is slinging at them, “but they’re only human,” Rhett says. “A lot of artists will look at you and say, ‘That stuff doesn’t bother me.’ But I promise you: That bothers everybody.” The 27-year-old singer-songwriter has taken his fair share of abuse. Twitter posts directed at him of the “Hey dude, I just wanted to thank you for ruining country music as a genre” variety. Or “The Fall Out Boy concert was last weekend. What are you doing wearing wristbands onstage?” Rhett laughs. Sure, it hurts. He’s not backing down—but he’s embracing pop music in his bold brand of country like never before.

Rhett’s last album, 2015’s *Tangled Up*, notched four number one songs and catapulted him to arena-headlining status. But “Craving You,” which premieres today exclusively on GQ and features Maren Morris (scroll to the bottom), is the first single from Rhett’s forthcoming new album out later this year, and it’s all ’80s Phil Collins drums and massive earworm-y chorus. It’s a bold move toward the pop mainstream. As if to prove his bona fides, Rhett even went so far as to hire the engineer for the track who mixes those of Justin Bieber and Selena Gomez. Then he met with Big Machine Records

president Scott Borchetta, the man who helped transition Taylor Swift from a country star to a global pop phenomenon.

TR, as his friends and family call him, initially resisted following his successful country songwriter father, Rhett Akins, into the family business. But after stints in scrappy punk-rock acts and “terrible” country cover bands, he realized, like it or not, God gave him a Southern drawl. He convinced his dad to link him up with some country industry folks, was quickly landing songwriting credits for Jason Aldean, and promptly got scooped up by Big Machine as a solo artist. Six years later, he’s nominated for Male Vocalist of the Year at this weekend’s ACM Awards (during which he’ll debut “Craving You” live with Morris). And as he tells GQ when calling up from the road on his “Home Team” tour, he’s just trying to take things day by day. “It’s all a bit overwhelming,” he admits. “But I’m just not to look too far ahead on my iCalendar.”

GQ: How did you land on “Craving You” as the first single off your new album?

Thomas Rhett: Of the five or six up-tempo songs that we cut I just felt like “Craving You” was such a different direction for me. It kind of feels like an ’80s pop song in a way... but with my voice on it.

And how did Maren Morris come into the fold?

We didn’t know that Maren was going to be on the song until like two weeks ago. I remember her coming in and singing a bunch of harmonies on it maybe three months ago. At the time I think we decided, “Maybe the song is not really a duet song.” But my producer sent me a version with just me on it, and then he sent me a version with Maren on it, and I think me and my wife and my team were just collectively like “Wow, she adds such a crazy element to the song.”

This song has Top 40 pop-radio potential.

Dude, I listen to country radio a ton, but when I’m on Spotify, it’s nothing but Drake and Bruno Mars and Katy Perry and Ariana Grande. I’m so intrigued by how amazing pop records sound when they come on the radio. Sometimes I feel like if you compare a pop record to one of my songs it just sounds crisper and a little clearer. I wanted to get that vibe on this song. I always wanted to listen to one of my songs and at the end of just go, like, “Holy crap! That sounds incredible.”

So for “Craving You” we went with this guy named Serban [Ghenea] who is well known in the pop world for mixing songs. I definitely gravitate in a pop direction, but at the end of the day there is no changing this voice that God gave me. It’s Southern by the grace of God. And I’m not sure I could make it sound any more pop than this song right here. I’m just a country singer, man. And if my songs happen to fit one day in a pop space, and it happens to make sense on Top 40 radio, that’d be great. The ultimate goal is for your music to be heard by as many people as humanly possible.

There must be an undeniable pressure that comes with having notched seven number one hits at a relatively early stage in your career.

For sure. I think an artist’s biggest strength, though, is to be his biggest second-guesser. When you have a string of hits and especially when you have a song like “Die a Happy Man” that a lot of people are calling “Thomas Rhett’s career song,” it’s like “Well shoot, if everyone already thinks I’ve had a career song, how do I have another one?” I think the biggest thing for me then is not overthinking it. “Die a Happy Man” came from not having a love song and wanting to write one about my wife. Some

of the biggest songs come spur-of-the moment: "I'm not worried about writing anything with an agenda today."

You're already headlining arenas. Where does an artist go from there?

This might sound weird but when it comes to gauging success Taylor Swift is somebody I look up to a lot in that respect. When you think of all the things that Taylor Swift has accomplished, you're just like, "You've sold out multiple nights at soccer stadiums in Australia. What else is there to do?" And then you always see Taylor diving into something new.

Obviously I'm doing 10,000-seat arenas and I'd love to be doing 20,000-seat arenas, and then I'd love to be doing stadiums. But beyond that I just want to keep my business brain alive and always want to be diving into something that not a lot of people would expect. I'd love to be the first country artist with an Adidas sneaker deal.

Did growing up around the country music industry make your success any less overwhelming?

To a certain point. But my dad would tell you there came a point where I passed him in the success level of his career. My dad was out with me for the first few weekends of this tour and he came and saw me on the first night he was like, "Dude, when I pulled into the parking lot and saw all these people tailgating and then walking into the arena for a minute I was like 'Oh cool, we're going to a Jason Aldean show and Thomas Rhett is the opener. Honestly, I was looking for the headliner.'" I think that's when it got a little bit overwhelming for both of us. Because Dad never made it to arenas. So this is a first for me and him both. And it's cool because there are so many songs in my set I wrote with him.

That's a unique thing—writing and performing songs with your father.

Every time he comes on the road we write together. We just had our first number one [song] together: "Star of the Show." I think it's the first time in country music history a father and son have written a song together and it went No. 1. It's pretty special.

There's a great divide in country music between more pop-leaning artists like yourself and Sam Hunt and traditionalists like Chris Stapleton.

We're just in such a weird moment in country music, where somebody like me and Sam Hunt can exist on the same radio station as Jon Pardi and Chris Stapleton. I don't think ever in the history of country music there's been that much of a gap in how much one country radio station can handle.

And yet people don't realize there's a mutual admiration and respect between, say, you and Stapleton.

One hundred percent. It sucks because all of us respect each other. But it also makes the fans have to take sides. Chris Stapleton fans probably think he can't stand my mine and Sam Hunt's music when in reality Chris Stapleton is writing half of the music I put out. That's just stuff that people don't know, and you can't blame them for it. For a lot of people, traditional country music is all they want to listen to. And I completely understand that. But at the end of the day you have to do you. People can smell inauthenticity.