

(9.8.17) <http://www.rollingstone.com/country/features/thomas-rhett-talks-new-album-life-changes-w501889>

Thomas Rhett Talks Mixing Zedd, Tom Petty on New Album 'Life Changes'

"A lot of this record is very autobiographical and nostalgic," says the "Craving You" singer, who releases a bold new project



Thomas Rhett's time hasn't really been his own in recent months. Back in May, he and his wife Lauren adopted a little girl from Uganda; shortly thereafter, Lauren revealed that she was pregnant and they'd be going from zero kids to two. When he sits down with Rolling Stone Country in early August to talk about his new album *Life Changes*, there is the very real possibility he'll get the call that she's going into labor (it happened 11 days later, on August 12th).

Rhett relates this story, almost up to the minute, in the hyper-personal title track from *Life Changes*. A quirky, pop-tinged number driven by a funky breakbeat and a punchy set of piano chords, the song is a condensed retelling of Rhett's life from his aimless college days to finding success as a songwriter, right up to the point that they adopt and discover they're expecting another. "Ain't it funny how life changes," he sings, "You wake up, ain't nothin' the same." Despite the emotional context, it's not a soaring ballad: instead, you can dance to it.

"It feels like it should have been written as a ballad on a piano," acknowledges Rhett.

That detailed style of songwriting flows into other portions of *Life Changes*. In the current single "Unforgettable," he recalls every aspect of a first meeting, including sipping margaritas with a Coldplay song

in the background, over a chorus that recalls Katy Perry's "Teenage Dream." Elsewhere, he waxes nostalgic about his reckless youth and not fully appreciating it in the moment in "Sixteen," then nods to Tom Petty's "I Won't Back Down" while painting a picture of two teenage lovers defying their parents' wishes in "Renegades."

Rhett also happily crosses genre lines whenever he feels like it. Chart-topping lead single "Craving You" featured Maren Morris and evoked the angular, futuristic disco of synth pop. In "Leave Right Now," he tries his hand at the build-release style of dance music popularized by the Chainsmokers. In the Latin-tinged "Gateway Love," he croons like Drake, while "Sweetheart" calls back to Buddy Holly and the Crickets. And perhaps most surprisingly, he looks back to Seventies and Eighties country in "Drink a Little Beer," which features his dad, the artist and songwriter Rhett Akins.

"I think country music was always my dad's first love," says Rhett. "But he's just a walking jukebox, man. If you give my dad a guitar and ask him to play a song off the first Whitesnake record, he can."

You have used your own story a lot in your music, from "All American Middle Class White Boy" to "Life Changes." Why divulge so much?

I've just found my best way to write songs is to actually pull from personal experience. A song like "Life Changes" is definitely an autobiography starting from 2008 until now – taking you on a journey from being in college not having any idea what I wanted to do with my life, to being an artist and your whole team telling you to wait to get married because you're about to be so busy and never be home. And then you decide to get married anyway, and your wife becomes this insane sort of public figure without really promoting her as a public figure. I think people just fell in love with her and our relationship. And going from that to experiencing what it's like to tell your parents we're adopting a little girl from Uganda. I do love writing about my past. I love nostalgic-feeling songs whether that's with sounds or actually with the lyrics themselves. A lot of this record is very autobiographical and nostalgic.

That links to a tradition in country songwriting. People crave honesty, and something like "Life Changes" is about as literally...

As honest as you can get. Between that song and a song like "Sixteen," that delves back into my high school years, between that and a song like "Renegades" or even "Unforgettable" there's so many things that I definitely jumped back into my 16-year old-brain and tried to remember what was I doing then.

Do you feel like the sound of those songs, "Sixteen" and "Renegades," reflect what you were listening to when you were that age?

Absolutely. I remember getting my first truck, and the first CD I put in that truck was Eric Church's [Sinners Like Me] that had "Two Pink Lines" and "These Boots" and "Sinners Like Me." Yeah, [in] songs like "Sixteen" and "Renegades" I was trying to channel that rock & roll heartland country music – channeling Eric Church meets Tom Petty meets Bruce Springsteen in a way.

You cover a lot of different styles on the album, to the point that it feels even more expansive than Tangled Up. How were you able to assemble all these different ideas into something cohesive?

I have no idea, to tell you the truth. This record [was] written over the last couple years, so there would be months at a time where I was listening to nothing but Tom Petty, and so for a month I felt like I was writing nothing but anthemic-feeling Tom Petty songs. Or there would be months where I'd go by and be listening to nothing but electronic music, or dance music, whether it was the Chainsmokers or Zedd. There's a little bit of influence of that.



You can certainly hear that in "Leave Right Now."

Yeah, absolutely. And there'd be months where I'd be listening to Marvin Gaye or the Bee Gees and you'd write songs like "Kiss Me Like a Stranger." My grandparents influenced me pretty heavily on Carole King and the Drifters, so I think that's where my doo-wop love comes from. This record, it's not like I woke up one day and was like, 'alright, we got seven songs, [we] gotta fill four slots, but I haven't written a song that sounds like Frank Sinatra yet, I haven't written a song that sounds like so and so, I guess I better do that.' At the end of the day, I think my voice is the glue and I think just being so involved in the production process and just having my identity all over this record is what makes it cohesive.

What do you see as being off-limits at this point for a country record?

Well, I can't rap [laughs]. I know that much. So that's not gonna happen. I grew up listening to everything. On the way to school in the mornings [with] my dad, one day it would be the Beatles and one day it would be 2pac. Growing up it never was just listening to country music. I fell in love with country music initially just because, first of all, my dad was a country music singer and he played me so many Hank Williams Sr. and Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard songs. Even being 10 years old you can feel what heartbreak feels like – even if you've never experienced heartbreak – in a three-minute song sung by Merle Haggard. I think I fell in love with the stories of country music but I also fell in love with the productions of other kinds of music, playing around with sounds. I guess my brain is all over the place and I never listen to the same thing ever. As long as I'm making records, I would hope every record I put out and every interview I do with you, you would say this doesn't really remind me of the last record at all.

Your first two singles didn't fare so well, and "Vacation" was the odd release from you that wasn't a huge hit.

What has that told you about what radio will accept from you, and has that changed over time?

I wanted to put "Vacation" out because I wanted a party song in my set and I didn't have one. I wanted one that, even if it was gonna die at 30, at least some people heard the song and were able to sing it at my concerts. So I kind of learned my lesson on that one – there is a certain limit you can push to until you're told, "Dude, we love you, but this just is not going to work for us." Moving past "Vacation," we put out "Star of the Show," which was a song that when we wrote it was way too advanced for its time and it became a hit. And then now we're at "Craving You" to "Unforgettable." I feel like on every record I will put three or four songs that in the back of my mind I know for a fact will probably not be played on country radio.

Do you feel like the limits of what country radio will play are moving along as well?

Sure. I still think radio and country music and every genre are always ever-changing, so you just never know what's gonna work. I keep going back to it, but if you feel it in your heart and you feel it in your gut that this is the best representation of you, then you should give it a shot.