

(9.15.17) <https://www.forbes.com/sites/brittanyhodak/2017/09/15/country-musics-most-marketable-star-nearing-first-billboard-200-no-1-debut/#74324d0d5087>

## Country Music's Most Marketable Star Nearing First No. 1 Debut



If you were going to Weird Science a country star to life for marketability—and likability—in 2017, you would be hard-pressed to come up with a better mold than that of Thomas Rhett. He somehow strikes a perfect balance of nonstop exposure, both on his social accounts and a seemingly-never-ending string of high-profile media appearances, without venturing into over-exposure territory. The strategy has made him a favorite among Gen Y and Gen Z country fans alike, elevating him to superstar status rarely achieved by country artists so early in their careers.

At 27, the Georgia native has topped Billboard's Country Airplay chart eight times. Neither of his previous two albums, 2013's *It Goes Like This* or 2015's *Tangled Up*, has topped the Billboard Country Albums chart (he's peaked at No. 2 twice) or the Billboard 200 (he's reached No. 6), but his third effort, *Life Changes*, is on course to do both. It's expected to move more than 100,000 units in its first week—enough to safely top both lists.

*Life Changes* chronicles the events of Rhett's hectic life since the release of *Tangled Up*. The album is country at its core, although it mixes in influences from pop, rock, R&B, EDM and even doo-wop, making it likely crossover airplay is in Rhett's future. On the album's title track, Rhett shows self-awareness of his inherent market appeal as he sing-raps about his wife, Lauren, ("now she got her own set of fans, got a blue checkmark by her Instagram") and their two new daughters—a toddler adopted from Uganda and a second girl born last month.

Rhett's persona has long been tied to that of wife Lauren and their fairytale-sounding romance. (They met in the second grade, dated briefly in high school and were engaged at 22.) She has become a staple in Rhett's videos, has inspired several songs (including the Grammy-nominated "Die A Happy Man"), has and helped solidify Rhett's brand as Country's Favorite Husband—and, more recently, Country's Favorite Dad. Pair that with his lineage—he's the son of 90s country artist and songwriter Rhett Akins—and the backstory sounds

almost too good to be true. He can recount countless charming memories of hanging out with stars like Tim McGraw and Blake Shelton while completing homework assignments as a child. He's about as brand-friendly as artists come these days: scandal-free, good-looking, well-spoken and (new) media savvy.

In a genre where many country stars keep their personal lives under wraps, Rhett has his on near-constant display. He and Lauren routinely post behind-the-scenes photos and videos of their lives on and off the road. That's a stark contrast Sam Hunt, who rarely appears on TV and makes even fewer social posts, and several other top contemporary country artists. It's working: Rhett has a social following of 2.2 million on Instagram and 1.6 million on Facebook.

So far, Rhett — who has co-hosted CMA's Music Fest TV special for two years in a row and was a judge at last week's Miss America pageant — hasn't signed many endorsement deals. Instead, he's been focused on Brand Thomas Rhett. However, he's shown the ability to deliver big value for the brands he partners with. Last year, he began working with Budweiser. In June, the brand announced it was deepening its relationship with Rhett. Although details weren't released, Rhett has been featured in brand commercials and made several high-profile appearances at music festivals in with is almost certainly a seven-figure, multi-year deal.

For his part, Rhett delivered a new single, "Unforgettable," that simultaneously sings like an AB-InBev jingle and a country hit. He croons about meeting (and immediately falling for) a girl drinking a "Mang-o-Rita," one of the company's trademarked mix drinks. The lyric "Mang-o-Rita" is sung prominently no fewer than four times, in the opening line of each chorus and the bridge. With more than 23 million Spotify streams, 6 million Vevo views of the lyric video and millions of spins on country radio, the calculated brand integration has undoubtedly raised the profile of the beverage big time. That kind of integrated brand marketing will draw many brands to Rhett in the months and years ahead.

When Rhett bows at No. 1 on the 200 chart next week, it will mark the first time a country artist has reached the summit in 2017. It's been almost a year since Jason Aldean sat atop the all-genre chart dated October 1, 2016. It will almost certainly not be the last time Rhett posts a six-figure sales week to top the all-genre chart.