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Thomas Rhett brings retro soul to country radio



In this Sept. 15, 2015 photo, country singer Thomas Rhett poses for a photo at Sinema Restaurant & Bar in Nashville, Tenn., to promote his latest album, "Crash and Burn." (Photo by Donn Jones/Invision/AP)

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. — The initial market testing on a handful of new songs from country singer Thomas Rhett, including his first single, "Crash and Burn," wasn't promising.

"So the feedback came back on 'Crash,' I think the feedback said 'poor,'" Rhett said of the funky song with a beat emphasized with whistles and snaps. "So for us to put 'Crash' out with that kind of feedback was kinda scary and risky at the same time."

But the song hit No. 1 on Billboard's Country Airplay Chart and No. 2 on Hot Country Songs. (His mother called the local country radio station in Nashville and told the DJ, "You have to listen to it three times before you can love it.")

Now Rhett is nominated for new artist of the year at the 2015 CMA Awards, to be

presented Nov. 4 at Nashville's Bridgestone Arena. The show will air on ABC.

With each single he's released since his debut in 2012, Rhett has gotten closer to his niche in country music: a retro, soul-inspired danceable mix of arena-sized tunes and hooky melodies.

On his new album, "Tangled Up," the 25-year-old trained his voice so he could hit falsetto notes while still maintaining his Georgia twang.

"There are a lot of songs on this album that I cut envisioning myself in an arena," said Rhett, who has opened for Jason Aldean and Florida Georgia Line. "I think live shows are where fans make their memories of you. They can hear you on the radio all they want, but they aren't seeing your face and they aren't seeing how you sing 'Crash and Burn' live or how you do 'Beer With Jesus' stripped down."

Jesse Frasure, a co-writer on "Crash and Burn" and an album co-producer, said Rhett had a very clear vision of the album, which includes contributions from pop singer Jordin Sparks and rapper LunchMoney Lewis.

"He had faith that it was an unorthodox record, but it was still country," Frasure said.

"I think a lot of people think we're trying to be different for the sake of being different," Rhett said. "It's just honestly what we enjoy doing. ... I just think what we did on this record was so free."

He'll have a chance to see if the new music gets people to their feet as he prepares for a co-headlining tour with Brett Eldredge, which kicks off Oct. 29 in New York City.

He isn't afraid to bust a move on the stage or in a music video. He's released music videos of himself dancing through the streets of Charlotte, North Carolina, to promote his new album while on a tour stop and jumping out of planes while on vacation with his wife.

"Someone on Twitter said, 'Thomas Rhett looks like an unathletic version of Justin Timberlake,'" Rhett said. "Which I thought, 'I'll take that any day!'"