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Thomas Rhett Talks Heading Down His 'Own Lane' With 'Tangled Up'

By [Phyllis Stark](#), Nashville | October 05, 2015 7:39 PM EDT



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After scoring the first two of the three major hits from his debut album, Thomas Rhett worried that he might become pigeonholed as someone who was making music “in the same vein as a lot of what a lot of my buddies were doing too.” He decided he wanted to break away from that.

“I wanted to be in my own lane and be my own artist, [so] when people hear a song of mine they know exactly who it is,” he says.

With the support of his label, the Valory Music Co., Rhett made a left-field choice for the album’s fifth and final single, “Make Me Wanna.” And when that song also became a hit, it gave him the courage he needed to make a sophomore album that’s now being lauded for confidently venturing outside the typical parameters of country music.

That album, *Tangled Up* -- released Sept. 25 -- had already yielded the fourth No. 1 of Rhett’s career, “Crash and Burn.” He calls the project “super different and super diverse ... It’s definitely going to make us stand out among the crowds.” The Country Music Association new artist of the year nominee chats below about the album, its unusual duet partners, life on the road with Florida Georgia Line and why wife Lauren needs her own fan club.

How was the process of recording the second album compared with the first now that you have these hits under your belt?

There was more freedom. The first one, I think, I was searching a lot. I don't think I fully knew exactly who I was yet. I was just starting to play a bunch of shows, and I was doing these different tours and seeing how [different people make] records, and how they do their production onstage. I learned a lot over the course of the first record [so] that I knew more on the second.

My producer game was way more dialed-in on the second record. The first record was produced by, like, seven different people ... This one, Dann Huff and Jesse Frasure came in and did a fantastic job. It was such a free process. Literally every song I wanted on the record was OK'ed [by Valory]. What made this record so fun to make is that the label was having just as much fun watching us make it as we were actually making it.

You're coming off an album that had three No. 1 hits. Do you feel pressure to match that success, or beat it?

There's a little bit of pressure. I hope we can get four off this one, or five. But I think as long as we're putting out good songs that the people are loving and they're requesting at radio and downloading, we're going to be all right.

As established as you are now as a songwriter — with hits for Jason Aldean, Florida Georgia Line, Lee Brice and yourself — you surprisingly only wrote about half the songs on this album. What does that say about the pool of available songs in Nashville?

We have the best. One of the biggest things that changes when you do have hits is that the big, top-dog songwriters are pitching you some of their best stuff ... Could I have written the entire record with my name on every song? Yes, but I'm such a big believer in the best song wins, whether I wrote it or [not]. If I didn't write it, I have to feel a connection with that song, almost like where I feel like I was a part of that writing process.

You grew up in a musical household watching your dad, Rhett Akins, make a living as an artist, then have a long career lull, and then come back as a major hit songwriter. What are some of the key things you learned in that environment?

You have to learn how to take no a lot of different ways. A lot of criticism is constructive. That's something that Dad had to learn a lot. You definitely get the answer no more times in this business than you do yes. It's what you do with those no's that makes your success either great or not.

I've learned a ton of patience from Dad. You watch somebody go from being pretty much up here to down here to then back to being one of the best songwriters in Nashville, you have to learn to be super patient and know when your time has come. For him, that was songwriting. I just feel so blessed to be at the point where I've had success as an artist and I'm still getting booked to play shows and people are still asking me to be on their tours. We're on this steady climb, and I really enjoy the steady climb.

It seemed like "your time" came really fast.

Some people have fast success, and some people it takes them some time. I cannot believe we've sold as many downloads as we have, [or that] we can go to the middle of nowhere Nebraska and sell 2,000 or 3,000 tickets. That blows my mind that the

awareness of our brand is that big at this point in our career. Hopefully we can keep building those fans one by one.

You're still on Florida Georgia Line's Anything Goes Tour. Does it live up to the title?

It definitely does. Their show is the most crazy thing I've ever seen in my life, minus going to a dubstep concert. It's the biggest party in the world. From the moment the lights go down and they come onstage, it's just epic. So for us to be out there playing in front of their fans — and thank goodness for them letting us play in front of a sold-out crowd every night — I feel like we've made huge leaps and strides as far as studying a headliner and knowing what it means and takes to be a headliner.

How did the album's duet with Jordin Sparks come to be?

We wrote this song called "Playing With Fire," me and my dad and Ashley Gorley. We knew we wanted a big female powerhouse on the song, but we didn't know who. Our label president, Scott Borchetta, he had just met Jordin and her whole management team out in L.A. and said she was super nice. So we reached out to her team. They said yes and flew to Nashville, and she was the nicest person in the world and got in there and knocked the song out in, like, 30 minutes. I didn't know this, but she had always wanted to make a country record, so I think singing on my record was kind of a bucket-list thing for her.

How about the collaboration with Lunch Money Lewis?

Lunch sings this huge song in the hip-hop and pop world called "Bills." I wrote this song called "I Feel Good" with two guys in L.A. that work with him pretty regularly. I literally wrote this song two weeks before the record had to be turned in. Lunch was playing a show in Miami and put down the bridge [to the song] on his bus and sent it back to us, and we decided we wanted it to be on the record. It's pretty cool to have someone like that — a rapper/hip-hop guy that isn't a huge name but somebody I believe will be a huge name one day.

You've talked about how your wife, Lauren, needs her own fan club, and now she's starring in your music video for new single "Die a Happy Man." Why is she so popular with your fans?

She's just a ray of sunshine. Lauren has never met a stranger. There will be a bunch of girls that come through a meet-and-greet, and they'll say, "I love your music, but I really just wanted a picture with your wife," which is pretty hilarious. She's a very happy person, and her energy is amazing around people she's never met. I think that's why people gravitate toward her so much.