



FEATURES

## "IT'S ALL ME": THOMAS RHETT STAYS TRUE TO HIMSELF WHILE STRETCHING COUNTRY'S BOUNDARIES

INTERVIEWS

By Andrew Winistorfer



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It's possible that Thomas Rhett is the most famous musician you've never heard of. The 26-year-old is one of country's perennial "next big things," scoring four straight number one songs on Billboard's country chart. He's toured increasingly larger venues since 2011 and written some of the biggest country hits this decade for other artists (Lee Brice's "Parking Lot Party" and Florida Georgia Line's "Round Here"). But unless you're tapped into CMT or country radio, it's possible to have no idea the guy is on the verge of being a huge star.

Rhett aimed to change that with *Tangled Up*, his sophomore album, which was released last month and which he says was inspired by Bruno Mars and the iPod playlists of his high school years. There are songs that sound vaguely like Motown ("Crash and Burn"), songs that sound like funk ("I Feel Good" and "South Side"), and songs that sound like long lost Bon Jovi and Maroon 5 singles ("T Shirt" and "Vacation"). Plus there's a song that sounds like it features Daft Punk and another that has a guest rapper.

In other words, *Tangled Up* is Rhett's play for crossover fame. It seems to have paid off: the album hit number six on the Billboard 200, and has already sold almost as many copies as his first one. He went from a promised next big thing to actually being it this month. We talked to Rhett while he traverses the US

supporting Tangled Up, and talked trying to move country forward, trying to replicate the feeling of a Spotify playlist, and ghostriding the whip.

NOISEY: The album's been out for a couple weeks now, how has the response been?

Thomas Rhett: My first record has been out for like, a year and half, and it's sold maybe, 260,000 copies, and this one has been out two weeks and it's already sold like 140,000. It's a change in pace for me. I'm not used to things moving that fast. I've felt like my career has had a surge and I've moved from one level to the next.

And then there's a lot of people who are like, "I can't believe you can call this record country. It's a pop record." But I am who I am and I make the music that I make. I'm a country singer. Yeah, there's some songs on there that push boundaries, but at the end of the day, it's all me.

It seems to me that a lot of being a young country artist is trying to bring the genre to these new places and to new fans while simultaneously trying to appease this old guard that wants you to have mandolins on every song.

Exactly. The thing that bothers me is that I basically could have gone and cut record one again, and the same people would have said the same things. Which would have been fine. But why would I not want to reach as many people as I possibly could?

I've been listening to so many different kinds of music, and grew up listening to so many different kinds of music, that I felt that record two was the time and place to go out and try new things. Sing songs I never thought I would sing, and write songs I never thought I would write. And that's what Tangled Up was about. I've gotten so many comments where people say, "I never listened to country before, but 'Crash and Burn' made me a huge fan of you." When I can get comments like that, that means more to me than anything.

And we're both from a generation where there's not the mythical person who only listens to country music anymore. I feel like making a record like this, that acknowledges that rap and funk and R&B exist, is in some ways more honest than the alternative.

You're always going to have traditionalists, in politics, in religion, and in this case in music, who can't get past the fact that you don't have a pedal steel and a fiddle. Which is fine, but there's a ton of music you can listen to with that in there.

I'm from a playlist generation. From the time that iPods came out, when I was in 9th grade, or whatever, it was everything from Cash Money Millionaires to Merle Haggard to Fall Out Boy; it was everything across the board. When kids around my age come to my concerts, and I play songs like "Anthem" or "Vacation," or even the more traditional ones like "The Day You Stop Looking Back," it appeals to them, because it's setting a variety of a concert just like the variety they had on

their iPhones on the way to the concert. I couldn't tell you the last time I got in the car and listened to just one thing for four hours on a roadtrip. It's all over the place.

What are you listening to now, on the road?

Most of the time, when I discover new music it's when we're working out in the gym. I pull up the U.S. top 50 on Spotify and just hit play. I couldn't really tell you who half the people are, but I hit save on a bunch of songs. For me, if I can work out to it, then I know I really like that song.

You mentioned wanting your audience to come to a concert and have it feel like a Spotify playlist. I've seen you three times, and I wanted to ask that, because Tangled Up replicates your live show better than your first album does, I think. Was that intentional? I mean, I've seen you cover Bruno Mars.

Not really. People always ask with this album if writing different songs like this was intentional, but really, it came out like this because it was such a free process. My label was not breathing down my back, and saying like, "Make sure you cut four on the floor songs and four ballads and four midtempo." It was more like whatever me and different songwriters wanted to do, we did. And if I felt like it was cool, we recorded it. It just so happened that it was as "playlisty" as this record is.

You wrote a couple songs with Chris Stapleton. I think country is about the only genre where a guy like him can release an album that's hailed by NPR for being like, a "return" to "real" country, whatever that is, but he can also write two poppy singles with you.

I think that's what makes Chris so great. The last 50 songs he's written, you'd look at them, and be like, "There is no way Chris Stapleton wrote these songs." And I think from the outside looking in, you probably think Chris hates what I do, and I hate what Chris does, but in reality, we're ginormous fans of each other. I consider Chris Stapleton my idol. That voice is undeniable. He can do anything. He can write a jazz song, a pop song, a hip-hop song. There's no genre limit to what that guy can do. Him helping with "Crash and Burn" and "Southside" gave my album a really unique vibe.

You said you had 50 songs to choose from for this album. Are you holding on to those for the next album, or are you going to trash them and start new? For this album you had some songs left over from your first album.

There's something cool about knowing you have songs, but knowing you can start entirely from scratch. If you had asked me two years ago, "Hey, I want you to see the tracklist for your second album," I never would have believed that the songs that made this album would make this album. I don't know what direction to take my next album, so that's why part of me thinks I'll just start from scratch. You never know what's going to influence you, or what you want your live show to be.

In the video for “Crash and Burn,” you’ve gotta be the first country star to ever ghostride the whip.

[Laughs] Yeah, I think so.

Did you actually do it? Or was it rigged?

It was totally rigged. [Laughs] We were on a bridge, and if I did that myself I would have run that car right off that bridge. There was a guy laying on the floorboard on the other side who was controlling the gas. But we did our best with CGI to make it look real.

Did you go back and watch any of those classic ghostriding YouTube videos for inspiration?

Yeah man, I felt like we did it decent justice. But anytime you’re trying to recreate something like that, it’s kind of hard to fully nail.

You tried though. Something I’ve always been curious about with country music is that it seems like there’s a route to fame where you start out writing songs for other people before you decide to keep stuff for yourself and go solo. You wrote “Parking Lot Party” for Lee Brice and “Round Here” for Florida Georgia Line, then went solo. How do you decide what’s for you and what’s for another artist?

Every song finds its home eventually. For me, I felt like I was trying to make more of a “rock” sounding album for my first album, and “Round Here” didn’t fit with what I was trying to do. But it fit in well with what FGL was trying to do, and it had a better home on an FGL record than it did on my record. That song bought my first house, so I’m forever grateful for them cutting that song and making it a huge hit.

Your dad [singer/songwriter Rhett Atkins] has a similar career. He now writes songs for bigger artists after he recorded his own stuff too. Was that a career path that you saw for yourself? Did you ever see yourself becoming a solo act playing arenas?

No I really, honestly, never did. When I started writing songs I thought, “Man, I could get used to this.” You get to stay in town in Nashville and write, and sometimes you get to go on someone’s bus for a week and write with them on tour. There’s so much adrenaline that comes with writing a song that you know is a smash. But I just got to the point where I was writing so many songs, and people were cutting them. And not that they weren’t cutting them good, it’s just I wanted a shot at it after a while.

The fact that I knew how to write a song, I knew that I could influence my direction. I knew what kind of songs I wanted to write, and I knew what kind of artist I wanted to be. But I was sadly mistaken. I feel like I finally found out what kind of artist I want to be on this album. And I’m sure I’ll say the same thing again on record three.