

(12.18.17) <https://musicrow.com/2017/12/jay-z-thomas-rhett-jesse-frasure-a-conversation-on-the-power-of-music/>

Jay-Z, Thomas Rhett, Jesse Frasure: A Conversation on the Power of Music



The power of music is undeniable. It brings out our joy. It brings out our sadness. And it unifies us by fading away our differences and shining a spotlight on our common humanity. Although society sometimes has a way of focusing so much of our attention on our differences, music helps us remember— and perhaps offers its most important revelation— that in our truth, we really are all the same.

Songwriters Hall of Fame inductee and 21-time Grammy award-winner, Shawn “Jay-Z” Carter has been a dominant force in popular culture. With multiple businesses and accolades across the recording industry, he has become one of the most influential hip-hop artists and entrepreneurs of our generation. Likewise, Thomas Rhett is known for pushing the boundaries in country music with pop hooks, R&B grooves and rock. A husband and father of two, he identifies himself as someone who embraces his truth and is not afraid of expressing it, as reflected on his latest album, *Life Changes*. Publisher, Songwriter and Producer Jesse Frasure, with over 60 cuts in the christian, country and pop worlds, is not defined by any genre. He consistently pushes the limits of his creative talents, breaking down boundaries along the way.

These three creative powerhouses recently connected over a phone conversation to discuss how music and songwriting transcends our differences and allows us to live solidly in our truth.

With the division we see in today’s social fabric on topics such as gender, race, religion and politics, how can the power of music and songwriting transcend our differences and unite us?

Jay-Z: Music has been coined the universal language, right? This has been happening in music since the beginning of time. It’s just for society to emulate what’s happening in music. We have lines of division, you call

it country music, you call it rap music, you call it whatever. I think it was a way for advertisers to identify their audience. But as far as music goes, it's been crossing lines all over the world since the beginning of time.

Rhett: I definitely agree. I grew up in a musical family. And at a very young age I was introduced to literally every different kind of music. Whether it was bluegrass or hip hop or heavy metal or whatever. Music was always a huge part of my life and it was the thing that brought me close to a lot of friends. We all gathered and socialized over all different kinds of music. What I've noticed is that genre is just a word these days. It's more like good music versus bad music rather than it is hip hop or reggae or country music. Great songs can transcend boundaries like never before. And that's really cool to see happen in music today.

Why do you think that has happened?

Frasure: Technology was a big part of it. Genres started based on regions and now have access to more genres of music in more places. Some of it was just evolution. I think our industry focuses on genre a lot more than the actual listener does.

Jay-Z: I agree with what you're saying. I think that streaming really enhanced it. If you think about it, Quincy Jones was playing jazz festivals back in the 50's. They couldn't even go to the south. They were bigger internationally than they were in the states— because the music was accepted everywhere else. They didn't understand the idea of racism outside of America. But now with these streaming services, you get to see everyone's musical tastes.

No one says, "I only listen to country music." Everyone listens to all sorts of music. It's almost like a chef. Yeah, I'm a chef. I'm strong at making Italian food, but I can make any kind of food. I'm a musician. I just use different instruments. Thomas uses a guitar, you [Jesse] uses a drum machine. It's all the same thing. When you get to the heart of it and dig a bit deeper from just the instruments being used, it's all about love, disappointment and fear. It's like all these things that we all go through that is beyond color, beyond gender— when you strike that chord everyone relates to it.

Rhett: Yeah, and I do think it is amazing to see how similar a lot of genres actually are, because behind every great song, first of all, is a story. And I think the stories have been told in music since the beginning of time. The more vulnerable you can be as the artist, that's what draws the fans to you ultimately— at least for me. When I made my first record, I didn't talk about anything personal. There was nothing vulnerable on it really at all. And then, once I found out my fans really wanted to hear my life and what I was happy about, what I was sad about, I started to put that on my records. That's our job as songwriters to tell our story and tell our truth— and hopefully it can resonate with somebody sitting in that arena too.

Frasure: Jay, this [4:44 album] is a completely honest and raw record for you. And Thomas is at a point in his career where he's talking about real life aspects. For both of you guys, is that something that is a scary venture when you start getting into vulnerable topics of your life and subject matter? Did that truth just evolve to that stage or is it something you think about doing?

Rhett: For me, telling my story was the only way I was gonna go from that point forward. Even when I sit down and write songs today— it's really hard for me to write something I don't know about. You know what I'm saying? Even if I'm writing a song about heartbreak and even if I'm not personally experiencing a heartbreak or whatever in my relationship, I have before. And I think taking from your past experiences and writing about things you face has definitely helped me be the songwriter I am today. And especially, for this record, it was just talking about how graphic life has completely changed. When you add babies— I know you know this Jay— when you add babies to the mix of trying to still be a touring artist and working in the studio and having kids,

that changes your life completely. Talking about that on my record was definitely the only way that I was gonna go.



Jay-Z: And it's great to see it celebrated, because I think a lot of times the fear with artists, you get to a certain point in your life and you start trying to make something that's popular— as opposed to making something that's true, and making something that's vulnerable, and something that's honest. We gonna to find out that the truth is forever. We gonna find out that there's no time limit on the truth. It is what it is, what it is— across generations— even if they try to hide it. We see that with a play like Hamilton. The guy behind the guy, now is the star. That's how powerful the truth is. That the guy, who was really writing it, finally got discovered a hundred years later! It's never gonna go away. The truth is the truth is the truth.

And I think with the success of Thomas and the success of this album 4:44 this year, I think it'll give more artists the— not saying that we're the first to do it, obviously— but it'll give more people that confidence to be like, "Oh man, just being yourself!" Being yourself and not chasing things like you just said— things that you don't know about. Writing songs that are not true to you. We can hear it. We can feel it. We can feel when it's not authentic. We're fans of music too. We feel it. We're like, "Ahhhh." It makes you cringe. It's like, I see what you're doing. I would rather not sell any records than live on my truth, 'cause I believe that truth, whether it happens now, whether this album was successful this year or 20 years from now. It was gonna be successful, because it was honest. And it was true.

With each of you sharing the importance of creating in your truth, are you concerned about how that truth is being received?

Rhett: I do think there are definitely times when the truth coming off of your end can be a little bit misinterpreted. Especially when it comes to God, politics, and all that kind of stuff. My first record I released was a song called "Beer With Jesus." And that song was written with every bit of honesty and integrity of what I thought I would ask Jesus if I got the opportunity to talk to him face to face. That song got destroyed by people. I think a lot of it is what stage you're at in your career. Nobody knew who I was when I released that song and they're probably sitting there going, "Well, what is he talking about? Is he talking about trying to get drunk with Jesus!?" I think if I had released that song today, it would have had a whole different impact, because people have had time time to get to know what you as an artist stand for.

Do you think the industry is partly to blame for putting up limitations?

Jay-Z: I think that's the world.

Frasure: From my standpoint, I think the last couple of albums with Thomas have been pretty progressive, style-wise. You grow up with different backgrounds and different styles of music come into play. In our world there is a lot of pushback in different ways. Whether it's sonically or topically, there's definitely things we think about regarding boundaries. You want to be as truthful as possible, whether it's the way you want to sound or something you want to say. But yes, we still would have to deal with the boundaries. Mainly,

because in our genre, terrestrial radio is a huge aspect of it. And the pushback it seems is still dictating “this is country” or “this is not country.” But when we create, we don’t think about that as much.

Jay-Z: And I think it’s society. Country music or hip hop– it’s just like a microcosm of society. There’s certain issues that are deemed to be taboo, but as an artist you have everything on the table. And if we’re being honest with each other, until we’re having those conversations that are uncomfortable and difficult, that’s the only way we’re gonna move forward. We can’t just pretend certain things don’t exist. Or challenge certain things in society and religion. That’s how we get to a place of understanding. Had we not challenged the notion of Christopher Columbus discovering America, we wouldn’t know the truth. That was actually being taught in school to kids, in textbooks, and it was a lie.

You have to challenge certain things that you’re being told and question certain things to get to that place of wanting to know what’s out there– asking yourself, “Do I want to have a beer with Jesus?” These topics are how we grow. When we sit and have a discussion is how we come together. Because now I understand a bit more about you, you understand a bit more about me and then you start realizing that we have more similarities than differences.

Rhett: Why do we feel like we have to put a label on everything? You know what I’m saying? Where did that even begin?

Jay-Z: Everything is accumulation of everything else, right? Even people. Go on ancestry.com or one of those crazy sites and see how many different groups you’re made of. The thing that you’re saying you are, you’re actually not. You’re a mix of a bunch of different things. And so is country music. It’s a mix of blues, it’s a mix of this. And hip hop is a mix of that. We’re all a mix of different things. We all have been influenced by different people. I love Prince and Kenny Rogers. I’ve been influenced by Frank Sinatra, who influenced this person who influenced... everyone is a mix of different things. No one is just one thing.

Frasure: Was there ever push back when you incorporated samples like Hard Knock Life or other collaborations with rock influences?

Jay-Z: Not from the people. The people are gonna like it if it’s good. They like those sort of things. It’s really the gatekeepers. It’s the gatekeepers who want to keep things in a certain place. You know the Glastonbury story of “this is rock, we don’t want a hip hop person to headline this.” That wasn’t coming from the people. They came. There was like 180,000 people there. It was just the noise that was being created by people who don’t want things to change. The fear of change. Change is always good. We have to grow. We have to evolve and we have to take in new information. For your question, I think that’s why people received Hard Knock Life the way they did. It was my biggest album at the time.

Rhett: Are you co-writing a bunch, Jay? Do you do most of your writing by yourself or do you enjoy being in a room with other people to bounce your thoughts off of?

Jay-Z: I’m a great collaborator. I love it. Even when I’m creating by myself, there’s a lot of people around. You know, I love the discussion. This discussion that we’re having right now– I have all the time in the studio. I love discussing these sort of topics.

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CALL ME AN OUTLAW
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– THOMAS RHETT

What do you think about that segment of people who hang so tightly to the definition of a particular genre?

Rhett: Yeah, that’s been my whole career. I’m probably one of the biggest, most second-guessing people on the planet. I will ask a 100 people what their opinion is before I finally make a decision. But since the beginning I’ve always enjoyed blurring the lines. Whether it’s from what I’m wearing to songs I’m singing ‘cause what I do is definitely not traditional country music. But, I think Jay was alluding to this earlier, it’s like every 20 years I feel we repeat a little bit and we kinda do something that’s been done before, just in a different way. And I think people that are defining what country music is sort of forget that people were slamming what country music was 20 years ago as well. People say, “We need real country music like Merle Haggard and all those outlaws.” Well, the reason they were called outlaws is because they were doing something that wasn’t the standard in country music. I guess you can call me an outlaw in a way, except for the fact that I wear skinny jeans and Vans.

Jay-Z: And I think that voice is needed. I have a friend who is always like, “You can’t do that. It has to be more like hip hop.” And I know where he’s coming from. He’s holding onto something that he loves and that’s good. Just make sure that whatever we do, while we’re blurring these lines, that we still gotta be authentic. And that person keeps that little thing in your ear– so you’re like, “Okay, I’m not just gonna go out and do something, ‘cause somebody’s selling a lot of records and make this mash collaboration.” That’s messy. That’s what sets the whole thing back. So, you need that voice. And if you use it the correct way and you listen the right way and keep that in your heart, then what you make will be greater than the parts.

Throughout this conversation, you all have spoken a lot about telling the truth. But I also know that telling the truth can be hard.

Jay-Z: Yeah. It’s very difficult. It’s difficult for a lot of reasons. You don’t want to be vulnerable in front of the world. You feel naked– for the whole world to judge what you’re saying and judge your truth. Yes, it’s a song, but this is my real life. It’s difficult, but in the end there’s a payoff– the payoff to you as an artist as someone who’s super credible and someone who really cares about their craft. The payoff far outweighs the difficulties in getting to that point.

Rhett: That’s a very scary thing because a lot of artists become these people that fans look up to and then when they know what that artist is like– if they ever release songs that make them think anything differently of them– it’s a scary spot to be in. But at the same time, I’d rather have them saying the hard core truth rather than floating in this fairytale land that nothing’s ever wrong. It’s a scary place but you do feel kind of naked and you do feel vulnerable at the same time.

Frasure: It’s weird when you’re in the middle of it and watching the evolution of an artist. It’s one thing to be behind the scene doing different stuff on topics that are raw and more authentic and songs that are different.

But, to me, there's an anxiety that comes. You have a part in collaborating on this project that's very different for this artist. It's about to gain new fans, lose other fans, whatever's gonna happen, it's going to change.

At what point in your career do you get brave enough to put it all out there?

Jay-Z: I think as an artist you have to live in your truth. My first album had a song called "You Must Love Me" that I can't listen to today. No one knew who I was. They didn't know the characters. There was no backstory. But there was a song about my mother, my brother and all the hardships that we went through that's so raw, it's hard for me to listen to. Those are the songs that made me the artist that I am today. Those are the things that people held onto about me. So I think an artist has to establish that right out the gate.

Do you think our society is particularly hungry for music to bring everybody together?

Frasure: I think as a consumer, people listen to music to escape and make themselves feel better. I think the bottom line is everything that we're doing is trying to make music that reaches somebody, that touches them, that makes them feel better, makes them forget about their jobs, forget about their heartbreak.

Jay-Z: And it's happening. You go to the concert. That's where it stops. That's where all the differences stop. People all unified singing a song. I think sports may be the only one that can compete but it's a far second to music. Go to a concert. There's no separation. Everyone's locked into this song. And we're all singing it very loud. And we're all very happy. And for this second, we don't have to think about our differences and our politics and all the things that separate us. This is the great unifier. Music. The universal language. That's powerful.

Rhett: Being with that many people who are just as pumped to hear that favorite song as you are and singing that song back to you. That really is one of the most amazing feelings in the world— or even just being at a concert. Being up in the nosebleeds. Or in high school being with the girl that you love, being with your friends.

Just like Jay said, music is the universal language.