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Country Music Plumbs the History of Soul In Search of a New Direction

By Tom Roland, Nashville | May 29, 2015 5:06 PM EDT

As the much-maligned bro-country phase winds down, country has found its uptown funk.

Soul, R&B or hip-hop influences can be picked up in the synthetic percussion of Kelsea Ballerini's "Love Me Like You Mean It" (No. 8 on the May 23 Country Airplay chart), the chunky rhythm guitar in Zac Brown Band's "Loving You Easy" (No. 20), the syncopation in the verses of Old Dominion's "Break Up With Him" (No. 36), the reedy vocal tone and danceable groove of Brett Eldredge's "Lose My Mind" (No.30) and the Motown derivations of Gary Allan's "Hangover Tonight" (No. 48). On top of that, Thomas Rhett's "Crash and Burn" (No. 25) engages the spirit of the late Sam Cooke, following on the heels of "Make Me Wanna," a Rhett song inspired by the Bee Gees' disco track "Stayin' Alive" that reached No. 1 on the Country Airplay chart dated March 7.