



## A Conversation With Rhett Akins and Thomas Rhett

*Father and son hitmakers may differ but they're still both the future of country*

Posted in [MusicWorld](#) on July 27, 2015 by [Abby White](#)



Pictured: Rhett Akins and Thomas Rhett. Photo: (TR Photo courtesy of John Shearer/Getty Images)

It's the Monday after CMA Fest, and Rhett Akins and his son, Thomas Rhett, are taking a road trip to look at some land outside of Nashville. Thomas Rhett, who performed before thousands of fans at LP Field just days before, is coming off a hot streak of three back-to-back number one singles from his debut album, *It Goes Like This*, and is set to release his sophomore effort, *Tangled Up*, on September 25 on Valory Music Co. His current single, "Crash and Burn," is climbing the charts. Akins, who built his career as a country artist in the mid '90s — peaking with the number one hit with "Don't Get Me Started" in 1996 — is now an in-demand songwriter on Music Row, penning hits for Blake Shelton, Justin Moore and Jason Aldean, among others. While Akins and Rhett often collaborate, each artist has his own distinctive voice, like any father and son. BMI spoke with them about their musical inspirations, the current state of country music and how text messages can inspire songs.

Rhett, you've had a diverse musical career that spans decades. What's your secret?

Rhett Akins: The secret to sticking around is you actually have to stick around. [Thomas Rhett laughs.] That's the number one secret. There's not a magic formula. It's like losing weight — you have to go to the gym, you have to eat right.

You can't just do it for a month.

It helps when you love what you do. You can't stick around long if you're not passionate about it, no matter what you do for a living. I'm just one of those people who absolutely eats, sleeps and breathes music. That's the main reason I stuck around, even through the bad times, because I wanted this so bad.

What was it like for you, Rhett, when you found out that Thomas wanted to pursue a career in music? When were you first aware of his potential?

RA: He never came to me and said, 'Dad, I want to be a singer.' I have hours and hours of home video of us singing; from the time he was two, he had on a cowboy hat and a guitar in his hand. But I think, because I was a singer, it was just natural. He didn't think that this was anything special; I guess he thought every household was like this. Even though he sang his whole life — he sang at church, he sang at talent contests, he had cover bands — it was still just a hobby.

It really came as a shock, because Ben Vaughn at EMI met with Thomas Rhett to talk about him doing an internship during college, and that was just to fill up hours for a class. He went and talked to Ben, and it turned out his schedule conflicted. So Thomas Rhett left, and he was planning to go to Georgia for the summer to work with my brother — cutting grass, painting, and doing stuff like that — and Ben Vaughn says, 'I've met a lot of people in my life, and I've never met a kid that blew me away like your son just did.' I was like, 'What did he do?' And he said, 'Nothing, he just sat there and spoke. That kid has got gold dust sprinkled all over him. He didn't do anything, he just came in the room and was himself.'

[Vaughn] asked if he could sing and write, and I said, 'Yeah, not because he wants to, just because that's what he's always done.' And he said, 'Let me decide that. What if I got him a little bit of money and he didn't have to go to Georgia this summer?' And that's how it started.

Rhett, what was it like the first time you saw Thomas perform in front of an audience?

RA: I'd say the first "real" show was after I'd been writing a lot of songs with Frankie Ballard, and Carol Ann Mobley, who was A&R at Warner Bros. at the time, asked me how I could get college kids to Frankie's show. And I said, 'My son goes to David Lipscomb [University] and he has a cover band.' So Thomas Rhett opened for Frankie. A bunch of industry people were there, and everyone looked at me after he sang the first song, they were like, 'Your son is incredible.' He blew everybody away.

Did you want him to get involved in this business? What advice did you give him

when he told you he wanted to follow in your footsteps?

RA: I give him advice about 10 times a day. At this point, it's not so much advice, but more of an opinion. But back then he really didn't know — everything that I told him was brand new. He didn't have any clue what a manager did, what a booking agent did, what a lawyer did, or what a co-pub deal was.

Now it's more, 'Are you sure you want to do that?' Because Thomas Rhett is a trendsetter — he doesn't do the norm. Everything he does scares the daylights out of me. [Thomas Rhett laughs.] And he's always right! It never turns out that I'm right. Maybe it's because I'm a parent, I'm like, 'You sure you want to do your hair like that? You sure you want to wear those jeans? You sure you want to wear tennis shoes instead of boots? You sure you want to put out that song as your first single?'

Thomas, what was it like growing up with your father being a successful songwriter? Was there always music around and when did it first inspire you?

Thomas Rhett: When your daddy is an entertainer and a songwriter and gone two hundred-and-something days a year, I think you definitely grow up a lot differently than the majority of your friends. It wasn't like we were doing the 9-to-5 family thing. But every chance I'd get, I just wanted to get on the bus. I used to love riding in the bunk and getting to hang out with the band and watch Dad play shows. And I always loved getting the chance to entertain, to make people laugh, and I think that's what I loved about being around Dad. Growing up, he was the best, and getting to watch him perform, I took notes every night, from the age of 5 years old, I was learning without even realizing what I was learning.

As I got older, I started to think about what career I could make a life with. So I went to college — not really because I wanted to, but because all my friends went to college. I'm sure Dad loves to hear that, because he paid for my college, but I went through four different majors, and nothing was really sticking. I didn't really enjoy macroeconomics or math; I didn't really want to sell insurance. And it was always in the back of my mind ... I knew how to sing and how to play guitar, and I feel like I could make words rhyme.

But wasn't until that night, in that moment — that Dad was talking about with Frankie — that all those dreams kind of became a distant reality. If I could stick to it.

What's the dynamic of your relationship now? Is it collaborative? Do you bounce ideas off each other with your individual projects?

TR: Oh, all the time! As much as he says he doesn't give me advice, it's always advice for me. I call him — usually early in the morning or late at night, whether I've seen something on Twitter or I've just played a show or something bad

happened — and I need to tell him, ‘I think everything is going to end, what do I do?’ And Dad is the best at talking me off the edge.

Also, we collaborate a ton, we write all the time. We always have songs we write together on my records and we’ve written songs for other people together, so it’s a lot of fun to be able to do that with your dad.

Who are some of your musical inspirations? Are there any that your fans would be surprised about?

TR: I feel like both of our inspirations are very different. Dad, you can probably speak for both of us...

RA: My biggest of all time is the Rolling Stones — that was Thomas Rhett’s very first concert at Vanderbilt Stadium when he was 8. And classic rock, like Zeppelin. But also George Jones, George Strait, Hank Jr., Waylon, Willie ... all of the ‘70s and ‘80s country, plus every rap song: Run DMC, Whodini, LL Cool J, everyone I grew up with in the ‘80s. And bluegrass, and the blues — Muddy Waters, Robert Johnson. I mean, it’s literally almost everything but jazz and classical. I respect those genres immensely, I just don’t ride around listening to it.

With Thomas Rhett, I made him and his sister listen to all those songs on the way to school every day. No matter how much they hated it at the time, I’d catch them a few days later, asking to hear ‘that weird Paul McCartney song again.’ [Akins starts singing “Uncle Albert/Admiral Halsey”] I would notice them, it was almost like they went from eating cotton candy their whole life to eating steak, it’s like their ears could tell the difference. Even though they loved whatever was happening at the moment, they still asked to hear the Rolling Stones.

TR: A lot of people ask me how I get inspiration to write my records, and everybody always says I have a big hip-hop, R&B, funk thing going on. That all goes back to the music my ears first heard, riding around in my dad’s truck on the way to school. I think it’s really hard for me to make a one-dimensional record, and that’s why, with the last one — and with the new one coming up — are going to be all over the place, because I grew up listening to every different kind of music.

What do you like most about country music today? What direction do you think it will take in the future?

RA: For me, I love and hate the direction of country music. I love it because it’s different and it’s fresh and it’s new, and I hate it because it’s different and it’s fresh and it’s new. I grew up more on Hank Jr. and George Strait, and songs that were stories, songs that were slow by today’s standards. But Garth Brooks, or Brooks & Dunn, Tim McGraw, or Kenny Chesney are kids’ heroes. I miss the old school stuff, the awesome stories and the awesome hooks, but I’m also a music

fan of all centuries, so I also love what's happening now, I just wish there was a hint more people digging real, real songs. But hey, Frank Sinatra didn't love Elvis, and Elvis didn't love the Beatles, so it just keeps moving on and on.

TR: I feel the same way. Obviously, you probably really can't tell that I miss the traditional from the songs I've put out recently — like "Crash and Burn" or "Make Me Wanna" — those are about as non-Merle Haggard as it gets. But those were the first songs I ever learned; I remember sitting around in the living room with Dad playing old Hank Williams Sr. songs and Merle Haggard songs. Those were the first songs I learned the words to. I think, starting out as a songwriter, I fell in love with the story side of country music more than anything. The thing about today, yes, there are a handful of fans who would give their right arm for every song to be slow, but I think there are too many people in the genre today that are party-centered and they want a good melody and a good hook.

You both talk about how important storytelling is in a song. Where do you find your ideas for your songs? Conversations, books, movies, other songs?

RA: It's everywhere. I look through my text messages if I can't think of anything else. Maybe I could write a song called, "Where You At?" [laughs] or "What's Up?"

TR: Anytime we don't have a title Dad usually picks up the closest magazine and scrolls through it and we find the title.

RA: It could be on a billboard, or something you heard in another song, something that someone said that led you to think about something. As a songwriter, you have your radar on all the time. I'll wake up at 2 o'clock in the morning and I'll text myself a thought I had.

How do you know when songs are ready to record?

TR: I think that whenever I write a song, I can pretty much immediately tell if that is something that I want to record. But there's also songs that, at the time, they didn't really fit the direction I was headed towards. So, songs that I've had written and that have been recorded by other people — like "Round Here" for Florida Georgia Line or "Parking Lot Party" for Lee Brice — they fit the direction that Lee or FGL was headed towards. So if I'm not going to cut it on my record, of course I want to be on the biggest record of the year, with FGL.

RA: It also depends on if your album is done. There's no point in hanging on to a song for two years. If an artist wants it, it has to be such an awesome song not to let it go, when you know you can't do it for a couple of years.

Is there any advice you could share with aspiring songwriters on how to take it to the next level?

RA: Nobody likes this answer, but my biggest piece of advice is that you've got to move to where the music is. Whether that's Nashville, LA, New York, Miami, Atlanta or Austin. It's very hard to do this in Nowhere, Nebraska. You don't have anybody to bounce anything off of when you're not around songwriters. It's like working out by yourself or working out with a trainer — you obviously get way better results when somebody's pushing you. You learn something every day when you're in the room writing with another songwriter, so you've got to be where it's at. Unless you were just born Bob Dylan, and I've known very few of those people. I think Bob just had it in him, but it didn't hurt him to move to New York, and to that scene. I just think you need to be where it's at.

TR: The number one piece of advice that Dad gave me was that you've just got to write a million songs. And out of those million songs, you might have written one hundred good ones. I think you've got to get used to the fact that you're not really going to come to town and have your first songs be the most monstrous hits ever written. When you first start out, a lot of songwriters think they're amazing until their publisher says, 'Well, it's not the best thing I've ever heard,' and I think that's the best thing a new songwriter can hear — that they're not the best songwriter in the world. It makes you work a lot harder on your melodies and your lyrics.

The songwriting process is often collaborative. Do you ever write alone? How is it different, especially if you take part of a song in to work with another writer?

TR: For me, the perfect cowriters are the best part of being a good songwriter. With Dad, he started the Peach Pickers thing, and it just so happened that he and Dallas [Davidson] hit it off so well, and them three together [Akins and Davidson collaborate with Ben Hayslip as the Peach Pickers] was so much better than each of them on their own. I think, when you can find that niche in Nashville, where you have a group of 10 or 11 go-to songwriters that you know you're going to write a good song with, you up your game a whole lot. And writing with songwriters who are way better than you, that helps you become a better songwriter.

You've both played festivals on the BMI stage — can you share any experiences from one of those? How has BMI been an essential part of your career?

RA: I've been with them since '92, and I've never even questioned leaving. There are so many people over there who are constantly calling me and saying, 'I know you don't know this kid, but this guy is really good, he just needs a shot, he just moved to town, but he's awesome, please write with him.' I trust those guys over there. If they think he's worth it, I'll do it.

They've invited me to so many gigs — Key West, Kauai — and they're just like your family, they really are. They're somebody you've got to have on your side.

You can't really do it without them. And of course, I'm not talking about just because they're who you get paid through, but they really do things behind the scenes that they don't have to, like hooking you up with other people. And they really take care of your family — they welcomed Thomas Rhett in with open arms. When my mom and dad and brothers and cousins come up here for awards, they treat them like they're superstars. They're just all-around great to us.

TR: I would second the biggest thing that he said is the family aspect of it. I think that the 'whatever you need, whenever you need it' mentality that they have has made me and Dad say, 'Why would we ever leave?' They've been there since day one, they've helped me get into co-writes I never would have gotten in without them, and I've never second-guessed it once. Obviously, the Key West Songwriter's Festival is amazing and I think the unlimited opportunities that BMI offers its songwriters is incredible. Welcome to EditPad.org - your online plain text editor. Enter or paste your text here. To download and save it, click on the button below.