

Rolling Stone

Thomas Rhett Previews Progressive New Album 'Tangled Up'

"Old is becoming fresh," the singer-songwriter says of turning back the clock to find inspiration for his left-of-center LP

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On his second album, *Tangled Up*, Thomas Rhett says fans can expect even more of the funk, soul and R&B flavor of the project's feel-good first single, "Crash and Burn."

"In all genres, old is becoming new and old is becoming fresh," he tells *Rolling Stone Country*. "It's been going on in pop for a long time, and I think with songs like (Mark Ronson and Bruno Mars') 'Uptown Funk' and The Weekend's 'I Can't Feel My Face' — which sounds exactly like a Michael Jackson song — everybody is taking what they learned and loved from their idols and trying to make it into what they do today."

Citing James Brown as one of his biggest idols, Rhett says the way fans embraced "Crash and Burn" became the catalyst for his new direction. The song is close to breaking the Top 10 on Billboard's country airplay chart.

"It was a huge spike in confidence," he says of the track's success. "A bunch of people went with our gut on that song, and I think you always feel more confident when you know you went with your gut, and your gut actually worked. It definitely set the tone for the album."

Over 13 tracks, seven of which Rhett co-wrote, that tone is both progressive for country lovers and a throwback for pop fans. Produced by the Nashville-meets-Motown team of Dann Huff and Jesse Frasure, *Tangled Up* finds the 25-year-old making bold song selections, borrowing choice trimmings from around the musical universe and pushing the country-music needle even farther toward broad, Top 40 appeal.

"Anthem" starts the album off with a pumped-up country rap, while funk and disco collide on "Tangled" and melodic hip-hop meets pop on "I Feel Good" (featuring "Bills" rapper Lunch Money Lewis). The shuffling beat of "Vacation" bears such a strong resemblance to War's iconic slow jam "Low Rider" that the band were credited as co-writers, and many of the songs — "Crash and Burn" included — find Rhett pushing his voice to new limits. Rhett says he never had a falsetto before this year, but now uses it in concert every night.

"'Crash' is the hardest song I've ever sang in my whole life," he says. "It's the lowest in my vocal register and the highest in my register, all within 15 seconds."

One line in particular reveals the bedrock of Rhett's distinct new sound, and it shows up in "Southside," a hard driving "shake it" banger he's been opening his shows with:

"Like Memphis, Tennessee / Got in bed with CDB (Charlie Daniels Band) / Had a baby / Oh, and when the baby cried / It made this sound / Ain't no lie it was funkified"

"That's basically what the record is," says Rhett. "It's like this genre got in bed with this genre and had a baby and this is what came out, that's how *Tangled Up* got here. That line totally sums up the whole record."

But for fans of Rhett's previous effort, 2013's *It Goes Like This*, the rising star says about 25 percent of the new album should still feel familiar. Jordin Sparks appears for a duet on the soaring power ballad "Playing With Fire," "T-Shirt" and "Single Girl" bring back the smoldering romantic from "Make Me Wanna," and "Learned It From the Radio" delivers a pickup-sized load of dirt-road imagery.

In fact, one of the album's standout tracks is a subdued, straight-up country love song, one that Rhett says may be the best he's ever written. Featuring a delicate, grooving guitar part and some of his most passionate vocals to date, he wrote "Die a Happy Man" about his wife.

"I've been somewhat getting crap my entire career from my wife saying, 'When are you going to write a sweet song about me and put it on a record?'" he says. "It kinda makes you feel a little terrible as a husband, but she has been asking me for a long time to write a 'Just to See You Smile' by Tim McGraw type song. So that is the most honest song I've ever written about my wife. It really replicates our relationship with each other and our love for each other, so I think it will be really fun and exciting for people to see that side of me, because I've never really done that before."

While musical diversity seems to be becoming more and more common in country, Rhett knows the melting-pot approach is still a stretch. But to him, the combination feels just right — like he's discovered the artist he was always meant to be.

"On the first record, about half of it was so old to me that I didn't even fully remember who that T.R. was," he admits. "It was a complete shot in the dark. I wanted to be so many different things in the beginning — I wanted to be a rocker, I wanted to be a great songwriter, I wanted to be a great melodic singer. 'Make Me Wanna' definitely pushed me to start really focusing in that's kind of the singer and songwriter that I've always wanted to be — just a very fun, make-you-feel-good singer and songwriter. 'Make Me Wanna' fueled the fire for 'Crash and Burn,' and 'Crash and Burn' fueled the fire for this album."

Thomas Rhett's Tangled Up will be out September 25th.

Tangled Up Track Listing and Writing Credits:

"Anthem" (Nicolle Galyon, Shane McAnally, Jimmy Robbins)

"Crash and Burn" (Jesse Frasure, Chris Stapleton)

"South Side" (Thomas Rhett, Jesse Frasure, Chris Stapleton)

"Die a Happy Man" (Thomas Rhett, Sean Douglas, Joe Spargur)

"Vacation" (Thomas Rhett, Thomas Allen, Harold Brown, Morris Dickerson, Sean Douglas, Gerry Goldstein, Leroy Jordan, Charles Miller, Lee Osker, Andreas Schuller, Howard Scott, Joe Spargur, Ricky Reed, John Ryan)

"Like It's the Last Time" (Thomas Rhett, Rhett Akins, Ben Hayslip)

"T-Shirt" (Ashley Gorley, Luke Laird, Shane McAnally)

"Single Girl" (Thomas Rhett, Rhett Akins, Ross Copperman, Ben Hayslip)

"The Day You Stop Looking Back" (Jaren Johnston, Luke Laird)

"Tangled Up" (Chris DeStefano, Adam Hoffman, Matt Lipkins, Josh Osborne, Scott Schwartz)

"Playing With Fire (featuring Jordin Sparks)" (Thomas Rhett, Rhett Akins, Ashley Gorley)

"I Feel Good (featuring Lunch Money Lewis)" (Thomas Rhett, Sean Douglas, Teddy Geiger, Jacob Hindlin, Gamal Lewis, Charlie Puth, Joe Spargur)

"Learned It From the Radio" (Nicolle Galyon, Ashley Gorley, Jimmy Robbins)