



## Thomas Rhett brings the funk on 'Tangled Up'

Brian Mansfield, USA TODAY 4:55 p.m. EDT August 3, 2015



Tangled Up's lead single, Crash and Burn, is acting like a career-changing hit. Released in April, it has sold 472,000 copies, according to Nielsen Music, and sits at No. 9 on USA TODAY's Country airplay chart. With its whistling hook and a rhythm track deliberately designed to invoke the memory of R&B singer Sam Cooke's 1960 single Chain Gang, Crash and Burn sounds like nothing else on country radio.

Crash and Burn sounded so different that Thomas Rhett, the son of artist and songwriter Rhett Akins, says he and others on his team were terrified by the risk involved in releasing it. "If you're nervous about putting a song out, it's obviously a risk-and-reward thing," he says. "It could epically fail, or it could go all the way to the top and set you apart from the pack."

Since releasing his first album two years ago, Thomas Rhett, 25, has had a trio of No. 1 country singles: It Goes Like This, Get Me Some of That and Make Me

Wanna. He also has co-written hits for other artists, including Florida Georgia Line's Round Here and Jason Aldean's 1994.

However, he says, "there were a lot of us dudes that were in the same success level: playing the same festivals, being mentioned in the same liners on radio." With his new album, he says, "I wanted to sing songs I felt like only I could pull off."

Tangled Up has funk and R&B elements throughout. I Feel Good features vocals from LunchMoney Lewis, the singer on the recent novelty hit Bills, and keyboards by Charlie Puth, who wrote and sang the hook on one of the year's biggest hits, Wiz Khalifa's See You Again. Vacation is a party tune built off the bass riff from War's 1975 hit Low Rider.

Thomas Rhett and his co-writers realized the resemblance after recording the song. "When we took it in the studio and cut it, we were like, this definitely sounds like Low Rider," he says. So they decided to cut the song's writers in on the new songwriting credits. "Never in a million years would I have thought the guys in War would have been co-writers on a Thomas Rhett record."

Tangled Up also includes a duet with Jordin Sparks called Playing With Fire. The suggestion the two singers record together came from Big Machine Records label head Scott Borchetta, who met Sparks in his role as mentor on American Idol. Borchetta reached out to Sparks' management, and "within 24 hours, they were back to us and had already booked a flight to Nashville for her to come sing in the studio," Thomas Rhett says. "She told me she had always wanted to sing on a country album or make a country album."

John Marks, SiriusXM's senior director of country programming calls Tangled Up "sonically courageous," adding that it "will add jet propellant to an already heating-up career."

Country and R&B have a long, overlapping history, from Ray Charles' groundbreaking Modern Sounds in Country & Western albums of the '60s to Sam Hunt's hip-hop-influenced records. Other than the occasional mid-'70s side from the likes of Jerry Reed or Tony Joe White, country hasn't seen much of a funk presence.

Rhett believes the two can co-exist in his music.

"You would be amazed, watching the white boys dance to Uptown Funk at a show," he says. "Every one is moving. If that can work live at a country concert, I don't see why more funk can't be incorporated into it."

The track listing for Tangled Up follows:

Anthem  
Crash and Burn  
South Side  
Die a Happy Man  
Vacation  
Like It's the Last Time  
T-Shirt  
Single Girl  
The Day You Stop Lookin' Back  
Tangled  
Playing With Fire (feat. Jordin Sparks)  
I Feel Good (feat. LunchMoney Lewis)  
Learned It From the Radio