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## Thomas Rhett Talks New Album's Bruno Mars Influence



"These are not your average songs on a country album," says Thomas Rhett, taking a break from a mid-morning photo shoot at a swank hilltop house to play some of the tracks he's been working on for a small group of Nashville journalists.

And the dude is not lying. Although he turns 25 in just a few weeks ("I'll be halfway to 50," he says), Rhett is not obsessed with the future. Rather, it seems he spent his recent time in the studio looking back. The four songs he premieres from his still-in-progress second album, the follow-up to 2013's *It Goes Like This*, are all steeped in vintage Motown and R&B. Likely single "Crash and Burn," written by Chris Stapleton, who supplies backing vocals, is especially soulful, while "South Side," with which Rhett has been opening his set on the Florida Georgia Line tour, is an unabashed rump-shaker.

Listening to the new material, which also includes the dance-ready "T-Shirt" and power ballad "Single Girl," it's easy to understand why he has also been covering "Uptown Funk" on that tour: Rhett is clearly in a Bruno Mars phase. In January, he indulged his love of the energetic

performer with a cover of "When I Was Your Man," which premiered on *Rolling Stone Country*. "I've definitely been delving into that kind of music. Bruno has always been one of my idols, if you will. I've caught myself watching a bunch of YouTube videos late at night, just watching his stage presence and how he handles a crowd and moves around and works it. I realized I'm a very, very white dancer," Rhett says with a laugh. "But yeah, you can call it Country Bruno, whatever you want to call it."

While the lyrics to "Southside" name-check the Charlie Daniels Band, the song is essentially devoid of any country instrumentation. The chorus is built around Rhett imploring "people on the left, shake your south side," along with some nasty horns. Whatever the reason — perhaps it's Rhett's commitment to the funk — it works. "When I hear 'Southside,' I'm not in my head going, 'There's no steel guitar or no banjo.' It just makes me feel good," he says.

Despite its lose-it-all lyrics, "Crash and Burn" is also of the upbeat variety. Driven by some handclaps and an "ooh/ahh" chant, it evokes Sam Cooke, or even "Wild Night" era John Mellencamp, when Meshell Ndegeocello added some extra bounce to the heartland rocker's sound.

"If you listen to the lyrics to 'Crash and Burn,' it's like the saddest song in the world, but it feels happy. And I love those two different dynamics the song has in it. I've been inspired by the more funky soul side of myself lately," says Rhett.

Still, while he stops short of describing them as "old school country," he does say that there will be more traditional country songs on the new album too.

"There are obviously going to be songs on the record that are a lot like the first album," he says, "but I thought it was fun to get out there and try new things for my voice and for my songwriting. These are just a small little batch that came from that."