

March 11, 2013



Thomas Rhett's Brand New Uptown Sound

When you get a message asking if you'd like to come by a photo shoot as one of a few people on this planet to hear never-before-played mixes from Thomas Rhett's upcoming album, you say, "Absolutely! What time should I be there?"

Trust me, I'm so glad I was invited.

What I heard Tuesday (March 10) as I anxiously sat with a couple of other journalists is not just an evolution in Rhett's artistry, it could just be the spark for another revolution in this new dawn of mainstream country — one that ushers in some serious soul power.

A humble Rhett, with a slightly nervous grin, told me upon my arrival that other people weren't putting songs like this on their records. Of course, I was immediately intrigued. Just what were we going to hear? I knew it would be a little left of center — Rhett's always been one to push the boundaries — but obviously not your standard beat tracks and obligatory rap break. We've heard all that over the last two years thanks to a rash of remixes and pop-crossover releases.

So just what was Rhett preparing to sonically offer up? Funkiness like you've probably never heard in country music, that's what. A jivin', groovy, soulful, Motown-infused sound that had my jaw on the floor and my derriere shaking in my seat.

Four songs made their debut yesterday:

"T-Shirt," a pop/rock flavored tune from hit writers Shane McAnally, Luke Laird and Ashley Gorley that leaned a little Keith Urban on the guitar wailing and pretty funky on the piano breakdown. Rhett revealed yesterday that the song had "been through the ringer" and was even on hold at one point for superstar Tim McGraw.

"Single Girl," a song he wrote with his dad Rhett Akins and Gorley, that Rhett calls his "power ballad," a fair statement from my personal assessment.

"Crash and Burn," the song that had our eyes twinkling with that "oh, wow" gaze, penned by one of the finest artists in the business — the incomparable Chris Stapleton. Listening to Rhett's throwback, Sam Cooke-tinged vibe on the track was almost like being teleported back

to the glory days when songs were hooky and oddly happy as hell, even when the lyrics were heartbreaking.

“Southside” ... well ... let’s just say if Rhett were about to have a Jason Derulo “Wiggle” or Meghan Trainor moment and make the country world all about that bass, then this would be the song to do it. A killer horn section, a grooving bass line, a touch of hip-hop with some velvety-smooth vocals, it was impossible to sit still.

But don’t be worried about losing Rhett to any of these other musical worlds. The lyrics are great stories about life, love, heartbreak, loneliness, revelry and the simple life we all crave. These are country songs — just with a polish and presentation we’ve yet to experience.

“It just feels good to me. It makes me smile, you know what I mean?” Rhett confessed. “I’ve definitely been inspired by the more funky, soul side of myself lately, as of the past year or so. And it’s just been a lot of fun to delve down that path. And there’s obviously going to be songs on the record that are a lot like the first album.”

Rhett is definitely coming into his own with a quiet confidence and a swagger set to shake up the current climate. Stay tuned.