

Thomas Rhett Talks New Single 'Crash and Burn' and His Upcoming 'Soul-Filled' Album

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Thomas Rhett may have just earned his third No. 1 hit in a row last month, with "Make Me Wanna," but that doesn't mean he's putting things on cruise control.

Instead, the 2015 ACM Best New Artist nominee is already moving his music in new directions, in advance of what will only be his second album, due later this summer.

"I've been just so inspired by so many different things that I wanted to explore a different side of my voice, a more soul-filled side of my songwriting," he tells Radio.com. It's a bold move for a relatively new artist to shake things up, but then again, it's bold artists who tend to be the most exciting—and enduring.

The first hint of this new sound comes via Rhett's brand-new radio single, "Crash and Burn," which dropped this week.

"It's the most different single I've ever put out," says Rhett, "very throwback to the '50s and '60s." Indeed, while it's a song about dealing with heartbreak, melodically it's actually very upbeat, with a killer hook, a snappy beat and an arrangement that nods strongly in the direction of Motown.

"The first time I heard the demo of 'Crash and Burn' I was like, 'I gotta have this song,'" says Rhett. One listen and you can hear why, even though heartbreak

isn't a subject he's dabbled in much up to this point—or, actually, at all. "I have never released a heartbreak song," he admits. "I didn't even have a heartbreak song on my whole first record."

The new album is still in process, and the song list isn't finalized yet. In fact, there may still be some last-minute surprises. "I feel like that's the hardest part of making a record," he says. "When people know you're finishing your record, they're constantly sending you their best songs and their newest songs."

While he admits being enamored right now with this soul-based sound from half a century back, he also notes that the album will include "a huge variety of songs." Perhaps even, he hints, a song cowritten with Eric Church—an experience he calls "one of the coolest moments of my life."

Below Rhett filled us in on the story behind his new single "Crash and Burn," how dancing with his grandma helped inspire his new music and where he is in the process of finalizing his new album.

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Radio.com: Tell us about your new single, "Crash and Burn."

Thomas Rhett: The first time I heard the demo of "Crash and Burn" I was like, "I gotta have this song." It was written by one of my favorite songwriters and singers, Chris Stapleton. It's the most different single I've ever put out, very throwback to the '50s and '60s. So it'll be interesting to see how it works. It's such a fun song and has such an infectious hook.

Take us back to the first time you heard the song. Where were you?

I remember being in my truck, and my business manager, who also business-managed Chris, came out and said, "You've got to hear this new Stapleton song." And all I'd ever heard Stapleton sing were sad, old country songs. And so when this came on my stereo, I was like, "This is Chris?"

Chris and my buddy Jesse Frasure wrote this song [Frasure is also coproducing Rhett's new album with Dann Huff]. And from the moment the song starts you're hooked, you're listening to the words and you're like, "How can such a sad lyric be sung over such a happy song?" And I think that was the coolest thing about it, that the melody was so happy, fun and upbeat but the lyrics are so sad.

Is the new record a departure from your debut?

For me, country music will always be about the story, and making you feel some sort of emotion. And so all that is definitely still a part of me. And there are a lot of songs on the new record that are very relatable to the first album. [But] I've been just so inspired by so many different things, that I wanted to explore a different side of my voice, a more soul-filled side of my songwriting.

There's definitely a huge variety of songs on this new record. Some are very different, some are different lyrically, as in, I've never sung anything like that

before. There's just a lot of things that I've never tried, that I've started to explore in myself this past year.

Can you give examples of songs on this new album that 'explore a different side' of you?

So on the first record we had "It Goes Like This" and "Get Me Some of That" and "Make Me Wanna." I love those songs, but they're kind of all the same content-wise—they're all about guy-girl, pick-up truck, that kind of thing. That was definitely me, and it still is me, but a song like "Crash and Burn" is just.... I have never released a heartbreak song, I didn't even have a heartbreak song on my whole first record. So even though my heart's not broken [Rhett married Lauren Gregory in 2012], it's fun to sing songs like that.

There's a song on the record called "I Could Die a Happy Man," and it's the first song that I've really, truly, 100% written about how I feel about my wife. And that wasn't there on the first record. So it definitely has more of an emotional side.

Where are you in the process of recording the album?

We're probably half to three-quarters of the way done. We've recorded plenty of songs, and we're getting down to that phase where we have all these songs we think we want to record, but we're figuring out how to fill those last five or six spots.

I feel like that's the hardest part of making a record. It's not the first ones you cut, it's always the last ones. Because when people know you're finishing your record, they're constantly sending you their best songs and their newest songs. And I'm still writing songs. There's always something about the 'newness' of a song that makes you go, well, "maybe we should cut this one in place of one we've already cut." It becomes a very strenuous process to figure out what 11 to 15 songs you want the world to hear.

What sparked interest in looking back at older music?

A lot of people ask me how "Make Me Wanna" was written, and I tell the story: I wrote the song the day after I watched the movie Airplane. My grandma used to love watching that movie, and Grease, with me. When I'd go to her house, she'd always try to teach me all the dances they used to do in the '50s and '60s. And so I've always been intrigued by that period of music.

So when "Make Me Wanna" was written, it was written from that scene in Airplane when they are playing "Staying Alive" by the Bee Gees. I was like, "I want to go write that melody with a country lyric," and that's what we did. And ever since we put "Make Me Wanna" on the radio, and seeing how it went No. 1, and seeing fans scream the words to the song live, it made me want to keep going in that direction.

"Crash and Burn" is definitely 'of the family' of "Make Me Wanna." We did a few of those on the album, just because they make me feel good. And I hope they make other people feel good as well.

You also collaborated on a song with Eric Church, called "Salt."
That was one of the coolest moments of my life, getting to write with Eric Church. Eric had had that title for a long time. He came in with that idea, and pretty much the whole chorus written, and my buddy Luke Laird kinda helped him fill in the blanks, and I put my vocal on it. We haven't finished the record yet, and we haven't cut it yet, but we're definitely putting that in the small batch of possibilities for the new record. It was a blast to do it.

Another new song is "Learned from the Radio." Tell us about that one.
From the first time I heard it that song really stood out to me. When you're 15, 16, 17 and hanging out on the weekend with all your friends, you listen to the radio, and it's where you learn a bunch of stuff about who you are, about love, about breakups and about leaving home when you're 18. So that song really related to me, and I could feel it relating with a lot of other people. We played it a few times live, just to get it out there on YouTube and stuff, and you watch peoples faces and they're like, "Man, that line was me at 16 or 17." Or at 25. That's what I loved about that song, that I could just feel it being such a relatable song all around the country.

Is it a contender for the new album?

Absolutely. I've always loved that song, and it's such a well-written song. We're starting to narrow [the song list] down, [though] we're still writing, still getting pitched songs. It kind of never ends, until the album is actually in the wrapping paper.

Thomas Rhett's new single "Crash and Burn" is out now.