

# RollingStone

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## Brett Young Talks New Album 'Ticket to L.A.,' Gavin DeGraw Influence

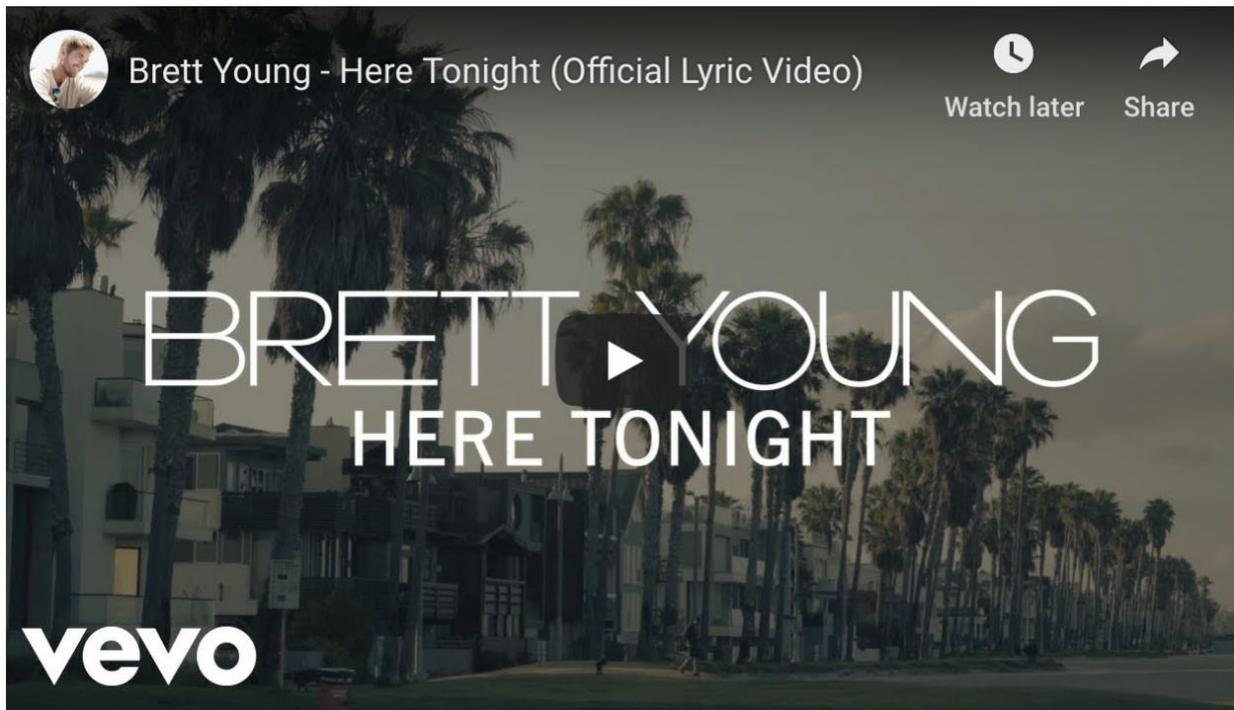
"I've never listened to somebody else's record and been like, 'It's all about girls,'" says California native of his second album



Back in October, **Brett Young** ticked an important item off the bucket list when he headlined Nashville's Ryman Auditorium in front of a sold-out crowd. He opened his set with a pair of new songs, "Here Tonight" and "Used to Missing You," that qualified as legitimately uptempo numbers within his ballad-heavy catalog. The crowd, a predominantly 30-and-up assortment of couples, was a bit slow to get out of those famous wooden pews and onto their feet. Young shifted gears.

"You happy? Here's a real sad song to ruin that," he joked, introducing "You Ain't Here to Kiss Me." The audience shouted in approval.

Later in the show, Young performed a cover of **Gavin DeGraw**'s "Not Over You," a Number 18 hit on the Hot 100 chart back in 2011. He requested that everyone sing every word at the top of their lungs and they were happy to oblige.



Young cuts an odd figure as an emerging country star in 2018 — he lacks the blue-collar bluster of Jason Aldean, the hip-swiveling goofball humor of Luke Bryan, the vocal firepower of Carrie Underwood — and yet, the 37-year-old California native has quietly racked up as many hits as [Grammy-nominated](#) fellow newcomer Luke Combs in roughly the same amount of time. His 2017 self-titled debut album produced four singles: “Sleep Without You” reached Number Two, while “Like I Loved You” and “Mercy” both ascended to the top of the chart. Then, of course, there’s “In Case You Didn’t Know,” a Triple-Platinum wedding playlist juggernaut with nearly 150 million streams on Spotify as of this writing.

But unlike Bryan, who regularly slips into fiction with songs about partying and reckless, youthful romance, Young’s songs depend on their plausibility. With his soft, slightly frayed croon, he conveys the genuine vulnerability of a nice guy who’s still working through heartache. And for the most part, that seems to be consistent with reality.

Young keeps the sensitivity dialed in on his second album *Ticket to L.A.*, but this time around he’s in a happier place — he got married in November, so that may have something to do with it. He sings about the excitement of momentary connection in the title track, feels his fortune changing in “Catch” and tries to hold on to a perfect moment in lead single “Here Tonight.” He makes room for good old-fashioned misery in “The Ship and the Bottle,” singing from the perspective of someone who knows he’s holding his partner back. Meanwhile, “Where You Want Me” employs an easygoing groove to upend a promising love story and “Used to Missing You” nods to the Jackson 5’s “I Want You Back” with syncopated stabs of piano and bass. And feeling the pressure to try something new, Young veers away from matters of the heart to write his own story as a set of three verses in “Chapters,” featuring none other than Gavin DeGraw.

“The label’s been asking for a ‘life song’ that didn’t involve a girl for three years, and it took this long to get one I was proud of,” says Young, knowingly.

Just before his Ryman show, Young sat down with *Rolling Stone Country* at an East Nashville Airbnb to talk about the album-making process, updating his sound and the influence of DeGraw on present-day country music.

**Before we get into the new music, let's talk about your success. I distinctly remember several weeks in 2017 where it felt like I couldn't go anywhere without hearing "In Case You Didn't Know."**

*[Laughs]* Sorry about that.

**Not to an annoying degree, but it was so ubiquitous. Was there a point where it dawned on you how big it had become?**

We were excited about that song from the beginning. It got a ton of adds at radio, so that was the first indicator, but the biggest one was that summer [when] wedding season hit and getting the amount of responses we did from people that that was their wedding song. For them to make your song a staple in the most important day of their lives, that's when I realized: this is a little bigger than just a radio hit.

**Do you think about it being a career song and how you keep moving forward after something so big so early in your career?**

That's kind of daunting, to think of the possibility of having a career song with your second-ever single. It would be tempting to try to chase that. It probably is going to be a career song. And that's awesome. I love that the career song is going to be one I actually wrote, that I enjoy playing. "Sleep Without You" was a good kicking-off point — it was a great song for us, but "In Case You Didn't Know" was, for me, where I identify the beginning of the career, of the success.

**Where did you get started with writing songs for *Ticket to L.A.*?**

The oldest song on this record is a song called "Used to Missing You." I wrote that with Jimmy Robbins and Jon Nite and like two weeks after [that day], I wrote "Left Side of Leaving" [with Robbins and Nite]. Both of those songs were contenders for the first record. The thing is, they filed the same slot. They were breakup songs that sounded happy. It was one or the other, and "Left Side" won out. I guess technically "Used to Missing You" was the beginning of the writing process for album two.

**Did you have a sense of what direction you'd be going with this album?**

How do I say this? I've never written to an album format. My philosophy is just have enough songs to pick from, then you can start filling holes with songs you already have. I don't like to, or rather, I'm not very good at, writing a song just to write it. It's a saying I always thought was silly and never understood until I got here, is write the song that's in the room. For example, I got engaged on February 16th. And I had my first write ever with Shane McAnally on February 17th. You'd think you were gonna write the happiest song ever written, [but we] wrote "Where You Want Me." He wanted to write a super Ronnie Milsap-vibe. It started out being a love song. You've listened to a love song up until the very end of the chorus. We got there, and we went, "Why does this not line up with the sound of the song?" I was like, "Cool, let's throw a twist at them."

**You've talked about how your label was asking for something other than songs about women or relationships. Do you feel like that's the perception of what you do as an artist?**

Yeah. I mean, I don't know that that's something — I'm not sure. I'm not aware of stuff like that as a listener, but the other, bigger part of my life — the business side, the songwriter side, the artist side, I'm hyper aware of that stuff. But I've never listened to somebody else's record and been like, "It's all about girls." Of course it is. The best songs in the world are love songs and heartbreak songs. But it's not like I didn't try. I'm just so particular about what I put on my records. I tried that song a bunch of times, that "life" song, that non-girl song. I just wasn't happy with the finished product. I don't know if that's something that comes across to fans. I wasn't getting those responses, but I definitely was to the point as an artist where I knew I needed it.

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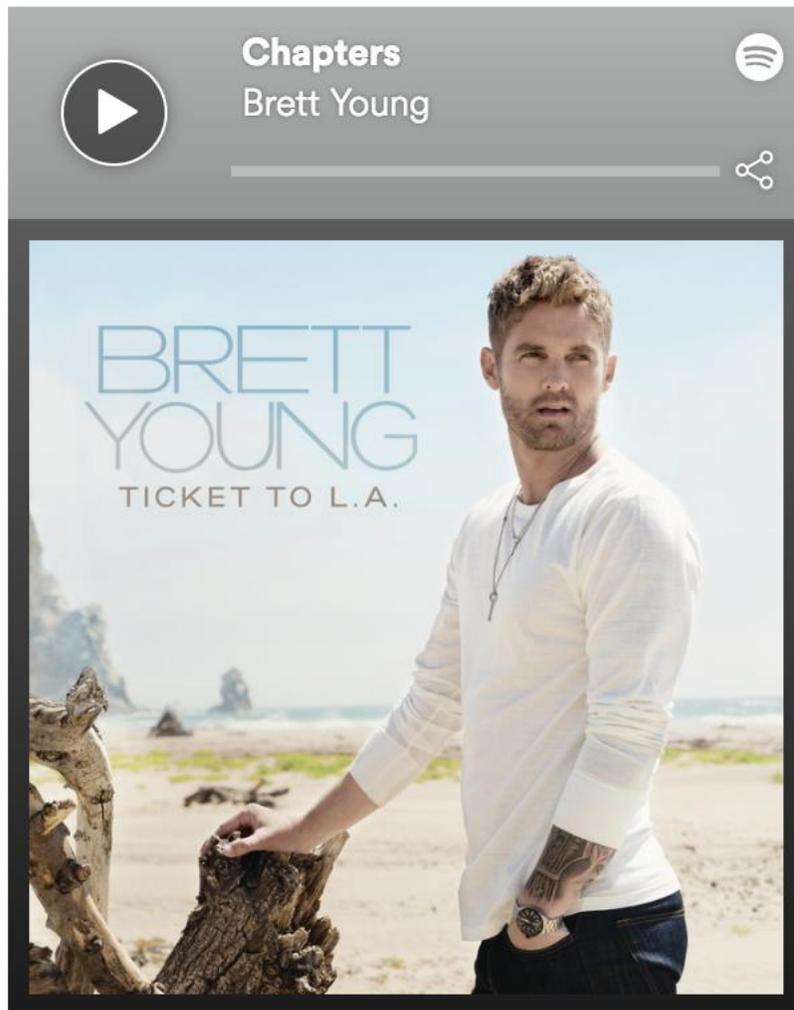
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**How did you two become acquainted?**

I was a geeky fan who basically stalked and idolized him. I saw 13 shows in one year, and I went as far as Hawaii for one of them. Two different times after his shows, we ran into each other and ... he was like, "Dude, I don't like Hawaii. I don't really know anybody that well. I'm staying at this place. You want to have a beer after the show?" U2 and Pearl Jam played the next night. We ended up all going to that concert and hanging out, exchanging information. We've been buddies ever since. It was that really unlikely thing where an over-the-top male fan doesn't creep you out [and] you actually become friends with him.

**He's clearly had an impact on what you do, but I can hear traces of his work, along with some of his contemporaries like John Mayer and the Fray, in what several other artists are doing in country right now.**

I feel like Gavin was at the end of the singer-songwriter [period], really. John Mayer was a big part of that [also]. It was like the singer-songwriters, there wasn't really a place for them in radio anymore unless they transitioned toward pop. But I think Gavin was right in the middle, toward the end of that. That was back when I was playing little rooms like Hotel Café, and things like that in L.A. where it was every hour on the hour, another guy with his guitar. It was beautiful, but it was because it was still working. We didn't have to do anything different to put Gavin on my record. Country music is so accommodating to pop and singer-songwriters at this point.

**Do you make any distinctions between your voice as an artist and your voice as a songwriter?**

Yeah. I hope to have a songwriting career for a long time after my artist career. I moved to Nashville to pursue songwriting. If I hadn't been the one singing the demos, I probably wouldn't have gotten a record deal. That's

one thing I've tried really hard to do is identify when I'm in a writers' room, especially if there's another artist in there, who are we writing this for? Are we writing this for me or somebody else? And what are we trying to say? That's a skill that's difficult to learn, that I aspire to learn, or to continue to get better at: write in and out of different genres, write for all different kinds of artists and write every different kind of song.

As an artist, I need to continue to be really true to the brand we've created. Not just because it's working, but also because it is 100 percent authentic. And so to stray from that at all, all of a sudden, it starts to be really contrived and people pick up on that.