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Thomas Rhett — from prolific songwriter to star in his own right



Ask Thomas Rhett about how he learned about music, songwriting or performing and you get variations of the answer — from his dad.

That would be his dad and namesake, Thomas Rhett Akins, a veteran country singer and songwriter who's written hits for Luke Bryan, Brooks & Dunn, LoCash, Lee Brice and a kid whose real name is Thomas Rhett Akins Jr.

But the influence of Akins starts far earlier than when father and son started writing songs together.

“If it wasn't for him, all I would have listened to when I was a kid would have been *NSYNC, Justin Timberlake and Garth Brooks,” Rhett says. “He introduced me to The Beatles and Southern rock, even Tupac. That's why my music is so diverse today.”

The same influence holds true for Rhett's performance. An engaging entertainer, Rhett picked that up around the house as well.

“I keep talking about my dad,” Rhett says. “My dad is the best impersonator, the best storyteller I've been around. He's always been the life of the party guy. Getting to watch him, that kind of rubbed off on me too. Getting up in front of people and performing came really naturally to me.

“Anytime my dad had a camera, I wanted to get in front of it and do something, does that make any sense?” he says. “It was a really cool way to grow up. Getting to be around Reba (McEntire) and Tim McGraw as a little kid might seem weird to some people. But they were his running buddies. You learn stuff from them you didn't even know you were getting when you were 10 or 11.”

Rhett now gets to show off his performing skills headlining shows in arenas. But it took awhile for him to get there.

Dropping out of college to pursue a music career at 20, Rhett wrote songs for the likes of Jason Aldean (“I Ain’t Ready to Quit” and “1994”), Florida Georgia Line (“Round Here”) and Brice (“Parking Lot Party”).

By September 2013, the Billboard magazine country airplay chart had five songs in the Top 10 written by Rhett and/or Akins, including “It Goes Like This,” the title cut of Rhett’s debut album and his first No. 1 hit.

That success put Rhett on the road, playing clubs and jumping on bigger tours as a support. While his songs were on the radio, both by him and other artists, he was plugging away, building his career

“It’s the slow climb,” Rhett said. “The more artists I talk to, like Dierks (Bentley), Aldean and (Kenny) Chesney, they had moments where they jumped up. But they were doing it year after year after year. There’s something that might be nice about overnight success. But there’s something rewarding about doing it the way we’ve done it.”

For Rhett, the jump came with “Tangled Up,” his 2015 album, and its song “Die a Happy Man,” which spent two months on top of the country charts starting in December 2015.

“Before we released ‘Die a Happy Man’ as a single, we were playing pretty consistently to 2,000-3,000 people a night,” he said. “Last fall, we filled the Yum Center in Louisville. “How do you go from 2,000 people to 16,000 people in a year? It’s really amazing what a hit song can do for you.”

“Die a Happy Man” changed more than Rhett’s career. It, he said, made him a better, more honest songwriter.

“After ‘Die a Happy Man,’ people want to hear the real stuff,” he said. “That’s freeing. There’s no more getting into a room trying to write a generic hit. If

you can have a hit that really touches people, that’s the greatest feeling in the world.”

The success of “Die a Happy Man” and “Tangled Up” put the pressure on Rhett for its follow up, as he was constantly touring. He met the challenge of creating “Life Changes,” the chart-topping album he released last year, by writing on the road, bringing out co-writers to collaborate for a few days at a time to write between shows.

“We’ll sit in the bus, drink coffee and talk, talk about song titles, melodies whatever,” he added. “The next thing you know you’ve written three songs in two days.”

The writing sessions worked. “Life Changes” has so far produced three No. 1 Country Airplay singles — “Craving You,” “Unforgettable” and “Marry Me.”

Rhett’s home life is flourishing as well. He and his wife, and childhood sweetheart, Lauren, now have two little girls, 2-year-old Willa and Ada. So he understandably likes to be home spending time with his family.

The good news is he’ll have some breaks in his schedule this summer.

“If this was last year, it would have been tough,” Rhett said of touring. “This year, I’m doing the Kenny Chesney dates in the summer (opening for that country superstar). But he only plays on Saturdays. The whole summer I’m going to be leaving on Thursday and getting back home on Sunday. I’ll be home from Monday through Thursday. That’s going to be a first in my career.”

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