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A BREAK FROM (NASHVILLE) TRADITION

Thomas Rhett's mix of pop, R&B and even EDM with country music is fueling his rise to superstardom. Not to mention fans' obsession with his family.

Is Thomas Rhett the first country star in history to use the word "Instagram" in a song?

Rhett, 28, leans forward on a couch in a recording studio as he considers this. The social media reference is in “Life Changes,” the autobiographical title track of [his third album](#), and his 11th No. 1 hit, which blared out of car windows this summer as it blew up on country radio.

“Well, FGL just did it,” Rhett pointed out. And it’s true, duo Florida Georgia Line name-checked the app in their recent single. However, Rhett smiled as he realized something else. “I’m for sure the only person to say ‘Uganda’ in a song, I would think, at least in this genre.”

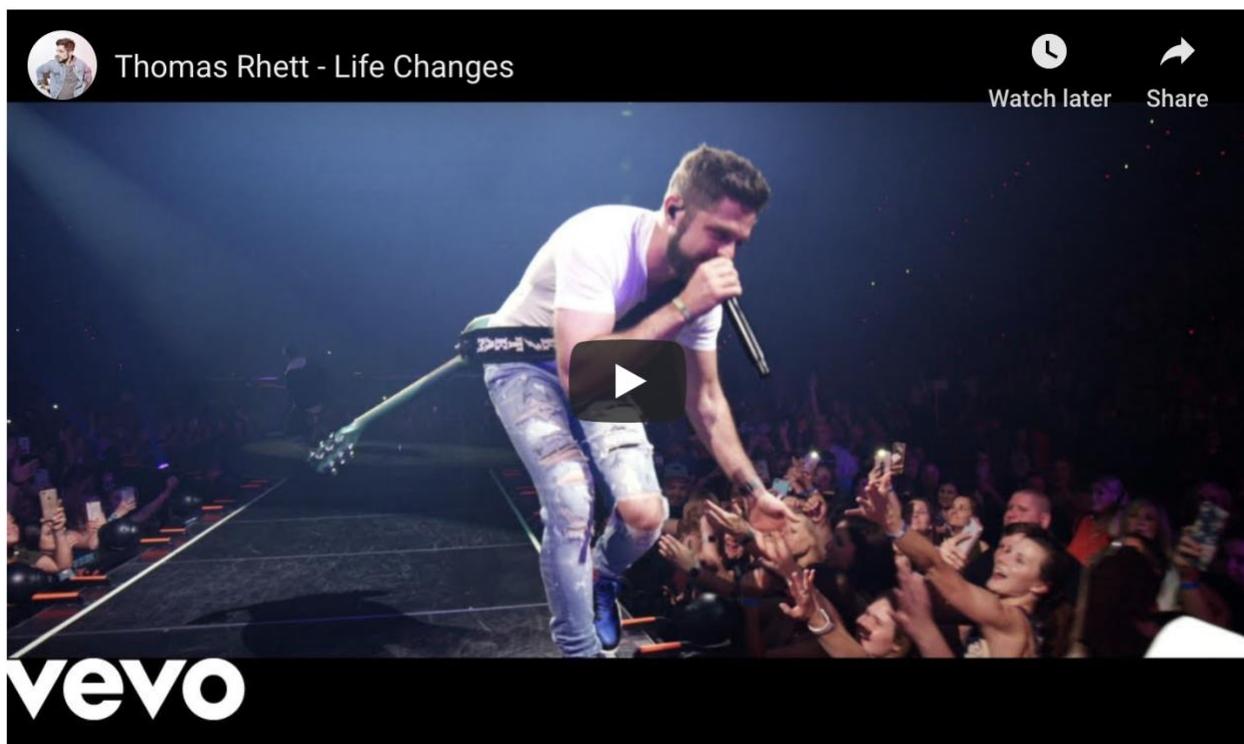
When he launched his career as a college student in 2010, Rhett dutifully navigated Nashville’s traditional road to mainstream success: Earn credibility by writing songs for other artists, get a record deal and pay respects to radio.

But Rhett, who hit it big with his third single after a couple of false starts, was determined to stand out from the pack of fledgling acts. In 2014, he released “[Make Me Wanna](#),” [which he called](#) a “countrified Bee Gees” song. It went No. 1. Then he debuted “[Crash and Burn](#),” an offbeat cut that had a 1950s doo-wop vibe. It rocketed up the charts. A few months later, when there weren’t a lot of love songs on country radio, the ballad “[Die a Happy Man](#)” — inspired by his wife, Lauren, who starred in the music video — became a six-week No. 1 and eventual triple-platinum crossover pop hit.

Rhett learned a lot in that unusual succession of events. Namely that despite what industry gatekeepers might advise, taking risks could pay off big-time. And you can never underestimate fans’ interest in songs about your personal life, from your wife’s newfound social media popularity (“*Now she’s got her own set of fans, got a blue check mark by her Instagram*”) to your adoption of a baby girl (“*I remember the day I told my daddy and mama, ‘You’re gonna have a grandkid, yep, from Uganda.’*”)

He's continued on that path, earning a Grammy nomination this year for his "Life Changes" album, mixing pop, rock, R&B and EDM with country music, an eclecticism that's fueling his rise as the genre's next superstar. In addition to high-profile gigs outside of Nashville, such as appearing on "The Voice" this fall as an adviser on Kelly Clarkson's team, he hopes to join an elite group of country artists: The ones who can play stadiums.

Only a handful of singers, such as Kenny Chesney or Luke Bryan, can attract enough fans. Until recently, it wasn't on Rhett's radar as a possibility. A couple years ago, he was headlining 3,000-seat clubs. Last year, when his manager told him it was time to take the jump to headlining arenas, starting around 12,000 seats, he initially balked.



"I said, 'Please, no,'" Rhett recalled. He felt he had finally perfected being the perpetual "middle slot" at big shows, the hype man for more famous acts. "I asked, 'Does anyone else want me to open for them? I need another year under my belt.'"

He eventually agreed, though he was somewhat terrified. Rhett hired [a set designer and choreographer](#) who both worked with Justin Timberlake and watched hours of YouTube videos of acts as diverse as Bruno Mars and the Beatles to get inspired. He and his band spent extensive weeks in rehearsal, determined to make every verse flawless. And it worked.

“We sold out 70 or 80 percent of the shows — it completely exceeded all of our expectations,” Rhett said. “I was like, ‘Dang, we have created something here. . . . How do we keep upping the game?’ ”



SHAKING ‘THE CURSE OF 15’

Rhett's introduction to country music started earlier than most. His father is Rhett Akins, one of Nashville's most successful songwriters. In the 1990s, Akins released a few albums and went on tour, where his son eagerly joined him when he could. Akins was thrilled his son shared his interest in music but didn't want to be the overbearing parent who pressured his kid to follow in his footsteps.

"You just knew that he was a natural at this," Akins said, recalling how Rhett would set up a video camera and play guitar, lip syncing to the Rolling Stones. "But we didn't know at the time he ever would pursue it."

Rhett (whose full name is Thomas Rhett Akins) attended Lipscomb University, a private Christian school in Nashville, though he was far more interested in playing shows at bars than attending classes. A few years into college, he played a songwriters event with his dad, whose publisher was in attendance and was impressed — he soon signed Rhett to a developmental deal. Within a year, Rhett co-wrote a song that wound up on a Jason Aldean album.

Virginia Davis, who is still Rhett's manager, also signed him at the time. "I was struck by the maturity and lyrically how evolved these songs felt, even though they were coming from a 19-year-old," she said.

Rhett landed a record deal at Big Machine in 2011, though his first couple of attempts at a radio hit didn't work: the twangy "Something to Do With My Hands" and heartfelt "Beer With Jesus." (The latter resulted in a few listeners calling him the Antichrist, [Rhett once said](#).) Both singles died at No. 15, and new country singers need that first big hit before the label will release an album.

"I thought I had the curse of 15," Rhett said.

The curse ended with “It Goes Like This,” a massive hit co-written by Akins, and the song propelled the label to release Rhett’s 2013 [debut album](#) of the same name. Rhett got a boost of confidence to, as he put it, “really just try to be unabashedly me.” Like many young country music artists, he grew up loving music from all decades and all genres.

By the time Rhett hit his stride on [his second record](#), (“Tangled Up” in 2015) which blew up thanks to “Die a Happy Man,” he had found a dream team in songwriter-producer Jesse Frasure, an expert in progressive pop production, and Dann Huff, a hitmaker with rock, pop and country singers. Rhett blends all the sounds together on his albums, with a heavy R&B influence.

Frasure admitted that he was nervous initially — would country fans appreciate tracks like “Crash and Burn,” or would they think they were too weird?

“I was just concerned that people weren’t going to understand what we had been doing,” Frasure said. “Was this us trying to force some new sound?”

Luckily, it proved irresistible to many listeners, especially the younger demographic. The song “Vacation,” a party song that [rings similar to War’s “Low Rider”](#) (Rhett gave the group a writing credit), was a little *toodifferent* for strait-laced country radio stations — yet it’s one of the biggest moments at Rhett’s concerts. His latest album has “Craving You,” a beat-driven track featuring Maren Morris, right alongside “Drink a Little Beer,” a fiddle-heavy duet with his dad.

“He doesn’t sit down and say, ‘I’m going to write the most different song today.’ His songs just come out pushing the envelope naturally,” Akins said. “You have to learn that Thomas Rhett has always known since he was a kid, since he was old enough to know what was cool and what wasn’t cool, he knows the trends before they’re going to happen.”



ON THE ROAD AS A DAD

While Rhett may have an instinct for what’s cool, he’s also gained a following for being unabashedly *uncool*.

On Instagram (he has 3.1 million followers, the second most of any country artist), he’s pure dad as he excitedly posts videos and photos from a Drake concert, his house during game night, vacation scenes from Italy — and, most importantly to his followers, his wife and kids.

Rhett’s wife, Lauren Akins, has become a celebrity in her own right — she has nearly 2 million Instagram followers. At his concerts, he sees more signs that say “Bring Lauren Out!” than almost anything else.

“We were just saying [yesterday] you could probably put Lauren’s name on a white T-shirt and it would probably be the hottest-selling item at his merch table,” Frasure joked.



The couple briefly dated in high school and then reconnected toward the end of college, and they married in 2012. “They make marriage look so fun,” one comment wistfully read on YouTube on the music video for “Die a Happy Man,” which features the couple walking through a forest, cuddling in a hammock and taking in a sun-soaked boat trip. (*“If all I got is your hand in my hand, baby I could die a happy man.”*)

The tabloid coverage around the couple picked up last year, after Lauren discovered she was pregnant — as they were in the middle of the process of adopting a baby girl, Willa Gray, from Uganda. Ada James’s arrival a few months after Willa’s inspired the lyrics of “Life Changes,” which Rhett wrote with his dad, Frasure and Ashley Gorley. But in photos — Willa drawing, Ada’s first birthday, the family playing on a swing set — he’s just a dad hanging out with his family, and fans are obsessed.

“I’ve been asked before if the way that me and Lauren are on Instagram is strategic — there is zero strategy behind that,” Rhett said. “The way we portray our life is exactly how we are.”

It’s been a tough adjustment on the road, as Rhett’s career rose to another level in the midst of being a new father — Lauren brought the kids on tour with him, and suddenly, his work routine was turned upside down.

“Pre-show back then was a lot different than it looks right now,” he said. “Now, it’s putting one kid to bed and reading a book to another one, walking off the bus, going to see your band for the first time that day and then being like, ‘Okay, it’s time to go be in rock star mode now!’ It’s a very weird shift.”

Things will get even crazier, as his new goal is to not only play stadiums, but take his show international.

“I’ve really tried to take every year and go, ‘How do we make this show look bigger than life?’ or ‘How do we make this record resonate with people not just in America, but people in the U.K. and Australia and Asia?’” he said. “I think that stems from writing a true story, and that’s what country music is at the core, a true, genuine story.

