

THE FRAY | A GREAT BIG WORLD | SHARON JONES | SKATERS



**ROBIN
THICKE**
Boldly blurring
lines

**NEON
TREES**
Pop relief

**LEA
MICHELE**
Gleeful solo

**DAVID
CROSBY**
His way



**STAR SHOTS
WHO'S NEXT
POP HITMAKER**



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SMOOTH BLEND

**Robin Thicke scores by blurring the lines
between pop, soul and hip-hop**

By Russell Hall



Onstage in Minneapolis, 2013

Although many artists become more serious with age, Robin Thicke sees himself on a reverse course—shedding youthful intensity in favor of a more freewheeling aesthetic. “I started out with very lofty ambitions,” says the 37-year-old. “The guys I admire got more serious as they got older. John Lennon went from ‘Help!’ to ‘Working Class Hero.’ Marvin Gaye went from ‘Ain’t No Mountain High Enough’ to ‘What’s Going On.’ I think I’m going the other way.”

If paying dues matters, Thicke has earned the right to go any way he chooses. *Blurred Lines*, the smash album he released last year, gained him legions of new pop fans, but his R&B cred has long been established. Blessed with a nimble voice highlighted by a transcendent falsetto, Thicke made inroads with urban audiences—over the course of five previous albums—mainly as a purveyor of smooth, sophisticated soul. “That music just connected with me,” he says. “For some reason hip-hop, gospel, R&B and soul music always felt like home.”

Thicke’s connection to music began at home. The son of actor Alan Thicke—star of the ’80s sitcom *Growing Pains*—and singer-actress Gloria Loring, he immersed himself in music as a way to mitigate the loneliness he felt as a child. “I spent a lot of time by myself,” he says. “The piano became how I connected with the world.” Forming a group at 14, he made a demo tape that caught the attention of singer-producer Brian McKnight, who helped him secure a record deal with Interscope. For years Thicke toiled behind the scenes, writing, co-producing and singing background vocals for such artists as McKnight, Brandy, Jordan Knight and Christina Aguilera.

“It was nice to have money in my pocket, to be making music, and move out of the house at 17,” he says. “But it also brought a lot of responsibility. Sometimes I wish I’d have been a kid for a bit longer.”

Thicke’s debut album, *A Beautiful World*, was released in 2003 to high expectations. Although one single, “When I Get You Alone,” achieved moderate success, commercially the album bombed. A new alliance was forged with white-hot producer Pharrell Williams, and a follow-up album was released three years later. *The Evolution of Robin Thicke* topped the R&B/hip-hop chart and garnered platinum sales. The ballad “Lost Without U”—written for Thicke’s wife, actress Paula Patton—hit No. 1 on the R&B singles

chart, making Thicke the first white male since George Michael to achieve that distinction.

Subsequent albums—including 2011’s *Love After War*—failed to match *Evolution*’s success in the marketplace, but Thicke’s reputation as a gifted soul artist was solidified. “I’ve had some good years and some bad years,” he observes. “But you never want to hover on any one year. You have to continually move forward.”

Blurred Lines marks a giant leap forward. Highlighted by its irresistibly catchy title track, the album is comprised mostly of breezy, upbeat dance tunes that innovatively straddle funk and pop. A kitschy, Diane Martel-directed video featuring topless models cavorting with Thicke, Williams and guest backing singer T.I. emphasized the playful vibe. “I wanted something silly,” says Thicke of the clip’s concept. “That sparked Diane to say, ‘What if we have the girls take their clothes off?’”

Thicke’s wife also helped shape the direction of the album. At night, after their 3-year-old son was in bed, the couple—who separated in February—would listen to Thicke’s demos. “I would play happy stuff and deeper, sadder stuff,” he says, “and Paula would always want to go back to the happy stuff. I ended up deciding to keep my sadder songs for a later date, and keep this album as much fun as possible.”

Since its release, honors and accolades have poured in for *Blurred Lines*—including Grammy nominations for Best Pop Vocal Album, Record of the Year, and Best Pop Duo/Group Performance, as well as four NAACP Image Awards nominations. Thicke is quick to credit his collaborators—Timbaland, will.i.am, Dr. Luke and Williams—for the album’s success. “I needed them to get me out of my head,” he says. “They don’t bring their issues to a song. It’s all about moving it forward—having a good time, as opposed to me going, ‘Sit down, let me tell you my problems!’ I took out the melodrama.”

Thicke spoke with us about success, controversy, and why he’s reluctant to call his style R&B.

Did you have goals for the album?

I was determined to try something new—mix it up. After writing and producing the first five albums mostly myself I wanted to work with different people, to get new ideas and inspiration. We ended up taking a lighter, more playful approach. But I never begin with a template in mind. I always go in and create, then see what’s happening. I’m not a big “concept” guy.



Onstage in L.A., 2013

‘I never begin with a template in mind. I’m not a big “concept” guy.’



What's behind the upbeat songs?

As an artist, you try to stay true to where you are in your life. At that time my wife and I wanted to hear and play happy music that made us feel good and celebrate good times. Plus, being in the studio with talents like Pharrell and will.i.am makes you feel like you have fresh blood inside you. It ended up being a celebration of good times album.

Which song set the tone?

"Blurred Lines." I loved how happy it made me feel—how fun and different it was. It put us on track for making feel-good, fun music that had a good groove. We actually recorded "Blurred Lines" nine months before the album came out. A few friends started calling randomly, saying it was their favorite. Everyone seemed to like it, but nobody knew what it would become. It was really a case of getting lucky.

What songs followed?

We made a whole bunch of recordings after that but they didn't quite blend together. Then, right at the end, I wrote three songs—"Ooo La La," "Ain't No Hat 4 That" and "Get in My Way"—that made the album come together. After months of futility we finally had a good week!

You wrote "The Good Life" years ago.

That happens to many songwriters: There's something you felt wasn't quite ready yet, and then later it starts to tug at you. "The Good Life" seemed to resonate stronger than ever. With the lack of commercial success of my last album, I felt, "Can I still realize and appreciate this great life I have?" To have a beautiful family and be able to do what you love to do—even if it's not a great success—is still a good life.

Why did you start writing songs?

I loved music so much I started teaching myself to play piano so that I *could* write songs. I also felt a sense of isolation—that was very much a factor. I spent a lot of time alone in a big house, and the piano was there. You find a way to deal with your loneliness or find some sense of worth. If you can write songs, you start to like yourself.

What elements went into your style?

My mom listened to a lot of soul singers, and my dad liked the Beatles, Bruce Springsteen and Bob Seger—he loved strong voices, guys who rock out. And I listened to a lot of hip-hop. Somewhere along the way I blended those three together. My main topics are love and romance—making love or finding love or needing love. I'm sort of a hippie in that respect. I want everyone around me to be happy.

Is your music contemporary R&B?

No, I call myself a soul artist. R&B's a little different. If you play my albums next to albums by true R&B artists, you might say, "Well, that's not really R&B." It's been a mixture. There are some rock songs and some Beatles-type stuff. I always try to mix it up and make my own brand of music. When you think of the greats—Stevie Wonder and Prince and Michael Jackson—you don't necessarily think of them as R&B singers. They made their own type of music. I try to do that. I try to make music that I like to hear—and then hope others like it as well.



Onstage in Minneapolis, 2013

Kirstin Barlowe

When did you realize you could sing?

Probably when I was 10. I started to sing for people. I would find myself doing Prince or Michael Jackson on the school bus. And then a couple of buddies of mine, when they tried to get girls, would say, "Hey Rob, sing for the girls!" (*laughs*) I became the token entertainer.

Did you take vocal lessons?

Just one—but it wasn't right for me. Years later I had some instruction in vocal strengthening, but I really wanted to find my own path instead of having someone coach me.

Did the years spent writing and producing others serve you well?

I'm sure it did. It's all about exercising the songwriting muscle. I was lucky as a young writer to be on a couple dozen gold and platinum albums by the time I was 21. Then I realized my real dream was to become a recording artist, so I started putting all my time into that. That's when all that songwriting and production time worked to my advantage. It's the 10,000 hours theory.

Were you encouraged along the way?

Various people helped at different stages. Brian McKnight was very helpful when I was about 15. He helped me land a record deal at Interscope, recorded songs with me, and got people to take me seriously. After that, when I was 17, I wrote and produced most of Jordan Knight's first solo album. After writing and producing for other artists, when I was 21 I had my own little studio and decided it was time to work on my music.

THICKE OF IT

Producer-engineer Tony Maserati handled the mixes for most of *Blurred Lines*, including the title track. The Grammy-winning soundman—who's worked with Beyoncé, Jason Mraz and Black Eyed Peas—describes Thicke as "extremely hands-on" in the process. "Before I began work I listened carefully to his roughs," he reveals. "In many cases Robin made his directional focus evident as he's writing and producing by using particular reverbs or delays. The roughs for several songs on *Blurred Lines* mimicked the equalization curves used on old '70s records. It was clear he was looking to get some of that retro vibe." Thicke was especially meticulous with vocal

arrangements. "I'm not sure people understand just how good he is," says Maserati. "His facility as a singer—his command and confidence—makes his records a joy to work on. Sometimes I'd go too far with his vocals—push them forward in the mix because they are that good. But he'd pull me back, saying, 'No, no, I want to be inside the track.'" Thicke's technical prowess eased the production process. "Some of those mixes took me as little as four hours," says Maserati. "Normally it takes me two days to do a mix. In a quick sentence Robin makes clear exactly what he's looking for so I can make the necessary change. He speaks to me like a musician—and I understand that language."



Do you enjoy showmanship?

I've gotten more into that lately. When I was younger I just wanted to jam. As time passes you see how the audience responds to certain things, and you want to add a little mustard. You want to be a great artist, but you also want to entertain people—make them happy, give them something they'll remember. Lately I've been trying to put that icing on the cake.

'I try to make music that I like to hear—and then hope others like it as well.'

happen very often. I'm trying to enjoy it. I don't want to put too much pressure on myself, or else I'll miss this moment. I'm trying to relax, and hopefully when it's time to make some new magic, that magic will show up. **M**

So you're hands-on staging the show?

You have to be. You try to hire people who are smarter than you are, and then use your own tastes to put on the finishing touches. The new shows will be more elaborate—actually, the biggest production I've been a part of. As far as the set list goes, you try to include the songs that are most entertaining, or that bring out the most emotion in the audience. We'll certainly feature a lot from the new album, but for people who've been following me for years, there will be back catalog stuff as well.

The "Blurred Lines" video sparked controversy.

My initial response was, "I don't think we should put out the topless version." But over time, after playing it for a bunch of people whose opinions I trust, we decided to go with it. That included my wife and some of her girlfriends. Everyone was provoked and titillated and seemed to love it. As far as controversy goes, I'm just taking these things as they come. A lot of it is new for me—I'm learning on the fly how to handle those things. But I have no complaints.

Has all the attention been a good thing?

It's all great, crazy, exciting—and nerve-wracking. You'd think this sort of success would provide a sense of calm and peace, but instead it gets you even more jacked up. It's like riding a wild horse—beautiful, breathtaking and nauseating at the same time.

Are you bothered that some have dismissed you as an overnight success?

I don't mind. The people who know you understand. You have to take it all with a grain of salt and be glad you created one song that a whole lot of people like. That doesn't