

ZACH THOMAS: (SINGING) My phone's been blowing up

Since you said goodbye

Everybody in the mob trying to find out

If I'm doing all right

So there's no need for a hey, how you been

This ain't the first time my heart's been broken

This ain't the end

'Cause I'm better off cracking a cold one

Better off drinking in the sun

Better off living life wide open

KELLY Country music is in the air in Detroit Lakes this week. One of the nation's largest country music festivals starts today at Soo Pass Ranch, just outside of town. Big names like Lainey Wilson and Brooks and Dunn will be on stage at WE Fest to perform for tens of thousands of fans. And so will a couple of local artists, like Zach Thomas, who we just heard singing "Better Off," the title track of his 2022 EP. He grew up in the Western Minnesota town of Wendell, and now lives in Fargo, and he is on the line right now. Hey, Zach.

ZACH THOMAS: Hey, Kelly, how's it going?

KELLY It's going well. So I understand you will be playing WE Fest tomorrow afternoon. And this is going to be your first time performing, yeah?

ZACH THOMAS: Yeah, this will be my first time out there. I've gotten to drive by the venue and Soo Pass Ranch so many times growing up around there, but this will be my very first time. I'm very excited.

KELLY On a stage, but have you gone before ever, like when you were a kid?

GORDON:

ZACH THOMAS: I've spent one day there. I had just graduated high school, and I went with my mom.

KELLY OK. So I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing, if you're like, that was what it was. [LAUGHS] But you have a memory.

ZACH THOMAS: I love my mom. I was supposed to be there for the weekend, but--

KELLY OK, but one day. We'll leave it there. No further questions. [LAUGHS] So fast forward more than 10 years. You're going to be on stage. How does that feel?

ZACH THOMAS: I'm very excited. Just being able to see your name on the poster with people like Lainey Wilson-- I'm a huge Brent Cobb fan, so being able to be on the same day as him, very excited.

KELLY Yeah. What drew you to writing and performing music, and specifically country music?

GORDON:

ZACH THOMAS: Yeah. So growing up in Wendell-- I actually moved to Wendell right after fifth grade, and before that I lived in Sartell, Minnesota, and I wasn't exposed that much to country music. A little bit through my mom. But it wasn't really until I moved to Wendell, when the only station that really came in very well was the local country station out of Fergus Falls, and so I fell in love with it there. And then after attempting college, I spent more time sitting in my dorm room playing my guitar and it just stumbled into my lap a little bit.

KELLY Yeah, that's cool. Let's hear a bit of another of your songs. This one is called "Don't Want to Back Down."

GORDON:

[ZACH THOMAS, "DON'T WANT TO BACK DOWN"]

ZACH THOMAS: (SINGING) But I've drank my share of whiskey

God knows I've let you down

I lost my way 'cause my feet don't seem

To stay on solid ground

I've been searching for redemption

In a bottle full of pills

These dues I paid you

Seem to make each day a living hell

So I'm going down to the river

Going to wash my sins away

I'm going down to the river

Oh, but the river dried out on me

KELLY Wow, Zach. So tell me a little bit about this song. I feel like it is in the theme of a lot of country music, which is

GORDON: taking on something that's heavy.

ZACH THOMAS: Yeah, this was a song that I had wrote in about 25 minutes. I was laying down one night, and it's one of those songs where you get it going through your head a little bit, and the only way to get it out is to just sit down with the guitar and some paper and just write it out. And I was going through a little bit of a tough time, and had been going through a tough time before that. And a lot of pent-up emotion, and some battles with depression that was going on, just all came out at one time there for that one.

KELLY Yeah, and of course, music is one way to express what it's like to deal with these kind of challenges. And I know
GORDON: that you've also talked about those experiences, depression, outside of your songwriting. What led you to be so open about those parts of your story?

ZACH THOMAS: I think that with mental health-- and in particular, too, with men-- there's a stigma around it, that you're supposed to hold it in, and I think that's actually one of the worst things that you can do. I've witnessed watching my dad, who also went through depression, watching him open up to us and inviting us in there to be with him. I think it's very, very healing and I think that more people need to know about that.

KELLY Are there emotions or experiences that you feel are easier to turn into a good song? Is it stuff like this that you
GORDON: go, this is really deep, I'm going to turn this into music?

ZACH THOMAS: Yeah, for me, I write a lot of sad songs. And I've joked about it, actually, with my fiancée. I was like, it's easy to write the sad songs for me, because when I'm sad, I'll write about it. When I'm happy, I want to live in those moments. So I'm slowly trying to get a little bit better with writing the happy stuff.

KELLY [LAUGHS] Country music has expanded in popularity in recent years. And in fact, this week, all five songs on the
GORDON: Billboard Top 100 are by country artists. Vulture says it's the first time that's ever happened. So have you felt that rise as an independent musician who's been in the genre?

ZACH THOMAS: Yeah, you've seen country evolve, especially over the past 20 years here. You really see it incorporating a lot of rock elements with Randy Houser, who's going to be playing tomorrow as well over at WE Fest. And then you also see the pop aspect of it really take off as well.

KELLY Yeah. I mean, I feel like there's just a lot of mixing, a lot of hybrid sorts of styles coming out. It's a really creative,
GORDON: inventive time going on.

ZACH THOMAS: Oh, for sure. Yeah, it's very inclusive. It's very exciting to be a part of it at this moment in time.

KELLY Yeah. Well you've got an EP and some additional singles coming out, but I have to ask if you have any favorite
GORDON: covers that you like to play?

ZACH THOMAS: I do. I do a really, really funny thing sometimes during some of my acoustic shows that I do. I do a cover of "Picture" by Kid Rock and Sheryl Crow, and I'll actually go into falsetto and do the Sheryl Crow part myself.

KELLY [LAUGHS] Talent, that's just talent. What are your hopes for WE Fest this year?
GORDON:

ZACH THOMAS: I'm hoping that the weather stays good, and I'm hoping that a lot of people show up at 3:20 in the afternoon on a Thursday to come hang out.

KELLY Yeah, OK. So WE Fest, if anybody has ever driven by that area, you know it is a big deal. It is camping for many
GORDON: people. So let's say someone listening is like, yeah, I don't know that I can do all of that, but they want to hear more of your stuff. Where can they find you?

ZACH THOMAS: Yeah, I mean, I'll play all over the area. I'll actually be, the day after WE Fest, playing at a place called the Fishbowl over on Cotton Lake, just outside of Detroit Lakes as well. So I play all over the area. You can check it out on ZachThomasLive.com, Facebook, Instagram, @ZachThomasLive as well.

KELLY And are you sticking around? Is there a concert that you're particularly excited to hear this weekend?
GORDON:

ZACH THOMAS: Oh yeah, I'll be sticking around for sure on Thursday. I'm a huge Brent Cobb fan. He's playing two sets, so I'm spoiled a little bit. And then also a huge Flatland Cavalry fan, so they play right before Lainey Wilson. So I'll definitely be sticking around for that.

KELLY OK, cool. And I have to ask, are you going to be camping?

GORDON:

ZACH THOMAS: I will not be camping. [LAUGHS]

KELLY That's OK.

GORDON:

ZACH THOMAS: I like my bed too much. When I'm close enough, I gotta be home.

KELLY That sounds good. Oh, Zach Thomas, thanks for joining us today. It was really great to talk with you.

GORDON:

ZACH THOMAS: Hey, thanks, Kelly, for having me.

KELLY Yeah. Zach Thomas is a Fargo-based musician. He's playing at WE Fest in Detroit Lakes around 3:00 PM

GORDON: tomorrow.