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### In Conversation:

#### Rhett McLaughlin's James and the Shame

By Saby Reyes-Kulkarni

Prior to this year, Rhett McLaughlin looked like the most unlikely candidate to release an album of solemn, heartfelt country music inspired by the classic sound of Merle Haggard and George Jones. In fact, McLaughlin himself didn't realize he had that kind of inspiration in him until he was moved to write songs for what would become *Human Overboard*, his debut album released in September under the moniker James and the Shame.

But McLaughlin, who is best known as one-half of the popular YouTube comedy duo Rhett & Link, is actually no stranger to making music.

Since he and longtime creative partner/high school friend Link Neil launched their YouTube variety series *Good Mythical Morning* in 2012, the pair have spoofed a number of popular music styles à la Weird Al Yankovic. But, when McLaughlin began to struggle privately with his belief system as an evangelical Christian in 2010, he turned to music as a means to serve a much more profound emotional need.

As it turns out, Neil also went through his own internal break from his faith—what lapsed evangelicals refer to as “faith deconstruction.” Ultimately, McLaughlin and Neil both relayed their journeys publicly, devoting an episode apiece of their show *Ear Biscuits* to their respective stories.

Needless to say, a life change of that magnitude comes with its share of tumult, and McLaughlin says he's still processing the change more than a decade later. *Human Overboard* captures the depth of the myriad feelings involved in breathtaking fashion.

Along with electric/pedal steel guitarist Alex Strahle, Derek Fuhrmann - a pop producer who's worked with the Goo Goo Dolls and Grace VanderWaal - and drummer Gunnar Olsen (Bruce Springsteen, Liam Gallagher), McLaughlin has crafted a remarkable blend of vintage country ambience with a modern polish that's as powerful as it is smoothly executed. McLaughlin demonstrates a gift for subtlety, plainly sharing his feelings with a welcome dose of reserve.

On leadoff track 'Believe Me,' for example, one hears a trace of pleading as he asks for nothing more than the space to co-exist, the words “I'm not asking you to agree” landing softly as Strahle's pedal steel murmurs in the background. Meanwhile, 'Where We're Going,' a duet with his spouse Jessie McLaughlin, pays homage to both first love and to the tribulations that befall a marriage. As the McLaughlins sing over a jaunty, shuffling groove, a wealth of accumulated shared experience - some spoken, some merely hinted at - underlies their performance.

On 'Creek and Back,' McLaughlin and co. apply the tried and true country-ballad formula to an unguarded meditation on parenting, with McLaughlin confessing that “The secret I prob'ly

should not tell you / is that I still feel like a kid myself / Been in over my head since we brought you home / Biggest thing that I've learned is what I don't know".

As far as declarations of personal truth that run counter to country music stereotypes go, *Human Overboard* lands McLaughlin in the same company as the likes of Sturgill Simpson and Jason Isbell. Though McLaughlin holds his ground when setting an example for what country music can be, he does so with a refreshing sense of grace.

Sitting down with Holler, McLaughlin speaks about his personal evolution and his new endeavors in country music.

**You've spoken quite a bit about your journey away from evangelical Christianity on both your podcast and in Medium posts. How does music allow you to express yourself in a way that's different from those other platforms?**

Well, this album started out not as an album. I started to write serious music as a way of processing different elements of my deconstruction. The first song that I wrote, 'Old Letters' - which ended up being the last song on the album - was essentially a letter to God; the way that I thought about God when I was an evangelical Christian and the way I think about God now, which is much more grey. It's me looking back on the relationship and trying to analyze it, almost like a romantic relationship. People who don't know my background might just think, "Oh, this is a breakup song".

I've written a lot of songs in my career, but they've all been funny. Here, I was stopping to feel something, which just isn't my personality. I mean, I've been in therapy for five years, and that's one of the things we focus on: how do I actually process the things that I'm going through? My therapist said, "I can see that when you're writing these songs, it seems you're able to tap into this side of yourself that you normally don't show".

Even when I talk on the podcast, it tends to be pretty cerebral. Since Link and I both had our episodes where we talked about our individual stories, people on their own have made the observation that, "It seems like Rhett's was very cerebral and intellectual. He kind of reasoned his way out of this thing." Whereas they would characterize Link's as more of an emotional process.

**Listening to the album, I kept expecting a quintessential heartache country ballad directed at Jesus. 'Old Letters' kind of satisfies that, but the tone seems to capture more of someone who's had time to get to a better place after a divorce?**

That's a good point. I think a lot of that has to do with the fact that my deconstruction all happened for me around the early 2010s. In terms of walking away from my faith, that's been complete for almost 10 years now. It was just a long time before I talked about it. It was also a long time before I sat down and asked, "Okay, have you really processed this emotionally?"

I think you're right, that it is a "you do you, I'll do me" song. Because that version of God that I was taught about - the version that's enshrined in the evangelical church - that's probably not a God that I'm ever going to have a relationship with again.

I leave it open-ended because I could have the whole thing wrong. I'm definitely less sure about things than I've ever been, unlike when I was a diehard Christian. Back then, it was very much "I've got this figured out and I think I'm pretty much right about all the fundamental things". I've never been more uncertain than now about those things that I feel are really hard to know.

**How comforting is that uncertainty? I think the music gave you space to allow yourself to be vulnerable - the song 'Believe Me,' for example, is almost like a plea, while on 'Flash of Rationality,' you sing "I've been talkin' out my ass, but I'm learning how to say 'I don't know.'" Could you talk about that?**

I think about the certainty aspect a lot. In some ways, religion, in general, is a great answer for people who are interested in having certainty about the ultimate things. I used to think that people who want purpose and meaning in life gravitate to religion. But everybody wants purpose and meaning. It's just built into the human psyche. If you subscribe to one particular religion, you kind of get those answers.

There's this paradox within Christianity, where there's a lot of talk about the mystery of God. But then, when it really gets down to it, they kind of wanted to figure all the deep stuff out and have a good Biblical answer for it. So you become addicted to that certainty. You think, "Man, how could I ever live not knowing what this life is all about, where I'm going to go when I die and what the point of all of this is!

Vegetarians talk about a transition away from meat. They say things like, "I never thought I could go without meat, but then I went a couple of years without meat and now I don't even like the taste, smell, or even the thought of meat." For me, certainty is that way. The Bible talks about a peace "that passes all understanding." I actually feel closer to that in my uncertainty. That uncertainty is there in the song about my wife and in the song about my kids.

The main thing is, "I don't know what I'm doing!" The reason I keep saying that so much on the album is that I'm resisting the urge to come to a conclusion. There are lots of things I still have strong convictions about, but with some of those ultimate things, leaning into the mystery has been a lot more satisfying and has just rung a lot more true. There's an addiction to certainty that you have to overcome.

**You went through this transition internally while you were publicly presenting as a Christian. How did that transition impact your relationships at home? How does a family stay intact when one person is undergoing this major change in course?**

The initial response, at least from my wife, was one of fear. Like I say in the song, "The conversation took a different tone / and started to make you cry." That's exactly what happened. I've always been really interested in science in general, and where science and

religion intersect, specifically the age-old evolution-creation debate. Even more so than me, my wife was raised in an environment where the “proper” understanding of the origin story and Genesis was paramount. Everything flowed from that, and if you get that wrong, you’ll get everything else wrong.

As it was happening, we were finding that you can actually have a marriage that’s based on love, which was present already and was still present. Our fear was that, “Well, love is important, but what’s really important is your commitment to Christ, and if you both don’t have that in order, then your marriage is gonna fail”, because that’s what you’re told repeatedly.

My wife went on her own journey that was maybe hurried along or at least initiated by my initial questions. She did her own thing in her own way and ended up in a pretty similar place. But there are situations where that doesn’t happen.

**How much of a learning curve was it for you to capture the atmosphere of classic records the way you did?**

From a songwriting standpoint - just me and a guitar, song structure, chords and melody - it came really naturally. When Link and I would write music together, it would be, “We gotta write this type of song in this genre because this genre matches this comedic concept.” You develop a knack for knowing when you’ve arrived and you’re hitting the genre in the way you set out to. So, I kind of knew what I was going for.

There are some people doing throwback country right now where, if you listen to it and you didn’t know they made it this year, it’s so authentic. I liked the idea of things being a homage to that, but not being a complete replication of it.

I would say that it was a learning process for all of us. I mean, I’ve never made serious music before. Derek’s over here learning all this stuff that he hasn’t ever really applied directly and Alex is just kind of a natural at drawing on all kinds of things. It just ended up coming together in a way that, to my ear, has this quality of, “Oh, I hear what you’re paying tribute to,” but it feels like it was made now.

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***James and the Shame’s Human Overboard is out now on Recondite But Cordial Records.***