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Jason Aldean has come a long way

His first hit 'Hicktown' was released 10 years ago this weekend

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Jason Aldean, shown performing in Indio, Calif., in April 2014, is playing before a sold-out crowd on Thursday at the Huntington Center in Toledo.

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Ten years ago, Jason Aldean's world changed.

Stopping by the store to pick up some beer before heading to a buddy's house, he opened the door to get out of his car but was stopped by hearing his first single, "Hicktown," come on the radio.

An emotional Aldean quickly shut the door and drove around the lot, listening to his song on the radio for the first time.

After beating around Music City for five or six years and having music deals fall through, he had come within weeks of returning home to Georgia to work in a

factory and become a bar musician. Landing a deal with Broken Bow Records changed those plans. Months after that signing, "Hicktown" was now playing on his radio.

"I had just turned 28 years old. I had been working at music since I was 14. I'd been at it for 14 years and busted my butt. I'd been through the ups and downs of the music business. To finally hear that song on the radio... man, it meant the world to me," Aldean said. "It just let me know that all the work I was putting in was finally coming to something."

Aldean recounted that story to The Blade recently while attempting to recover from jet lag. The man who once used to order a large pizza and eat it for three nights while pounding the pavement looking for honky-tonks to play in had just returned from an overseas trip, which included concerts in Oslo, Stockholm, Dublin, and London.

"Over here, people get up on their feet at my shows, get rowdy and a little crazy. Over there, they feel it's rude to stand up in front of someone. For me, I spent the whole show trying to convince them that it was OK to stand up. By the end of the show, they were rocking," Aldean said with a chuckle.

His sold-out show in Toledo on Thursday night is the first show after his European tour and launches a string of dates that will run through the end of the year and will include stadium shows in the summer with Kenny Chesney, Eric Church, and Brantley Gilbert.

The Huntington Center show comes almost 10 years to the day that Aldean's career ignited. "Hicktown" was released on March 28, 2005.

"Going back 10 years ago, if you'd have told me that 10 years down the road I'd have had all this success," he said, trailing off. "It was what I was hoping for, but didn't necessarily know if I was going to have it. Honestly, it's been a big thrill for me to be here 10 years later."

Not that the ride has been easy -- professionally or emotionally. He followed "Hicktown" with his first No. 1, "Why," and a string of other hits, including "Amarillo Sky," "Johnny Cash," and "Laughed Until We Cried." But then he stumbled with "Relentless," which topped out at No. 15.

"I was like, 'Uh, oh. I've kind of hit a wall.' I still wasn't comfortable. My career was just kind of slowly building."

"She's Country" and "Big Green Tractor" then delivered for Aldean, reaching the top of the charts and setting the stage for his best-known hits, "My Kinda Party" and "Dirt Road Anthem."

“ ‘She’s Country’ and ‘Big Green Tractor’ were huge for me. If not for those two songs, my career would not have been what it is.”

While ironing out the professional wrinkles in his career, the shy Macon, Ga., native was also dealing with the accompanying aspects of fame.

“I’m very private and quiet off stage. What you see on stage is not necessarily what you get when I’m not up there. It took some time to adjust to that -- to people not caring who I was to people really caring. That was a little bit of a shock to me,” he said.

Transforming from an introverted kid performing in VFW halls in Macon into a worldclass entertainer was only one of his struggles. In 2012, his fame caught up with him when a fan snapped a photo of the married Aldean kissing American Idol alum Brittany Kerr in a bar. The incident blew up, and the picture was in tabloid magazines around the world, causing pain and embarrassment for Aldean and wife Jessica and eventually leading to the breakup of their marriage.

"People go through stuff all the time in their lives. When somebody like me goes through it, everyone in the world gets to hear about it. That's unfortunate, but you either let it break you down and wear you out or you can grow and let it make you a stronger person in the end," Aldean said.

Aldean has apologized publicly for mistakes in his life, but is now moving ahead. He and Kerr were married on Saturday.

Professionally, all six of his albums have now gone platinum, and his current single, "Just Getting' Started," became his latest No. 1 hit on March 14.

"This has been a crazy ride. My career has allowed me to do things that I never in a million years would have been able to do otherwise. To have a career that's lasted this long ... it just feels really good."

Jason Aldean, along with special guests Cole Swindell, Tyler Farr, and Dee Jay Silver, will be in concert at Huntington Center at 7:30 p.m. Thursday. The show is sold out.

Read more at <http://www.toledoblade.com/Music-Theater-Dance/2015/03/25/Jason-Aldean-has-come-a-long-way.html#aUi3V7RTbYDftwku.99>