

Aldean ready to cross Lambeau off bucket list



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Jason Aldean performs at Progressive Field in Cleveland on the Burn It Down Tour. (Photo: Submitted)

The dozen stadium shows Kenny Chesney and Jason Aldean are doing this summer aren't the first time the two country music powerhouses have played together.

There was that time long before Aldean ever moved to Nashville...

"Kenny was actually the opening act for Clay Walker, and I opened for both of them," Aldean said by phone from a tour stop in West Virginia. "I was probably about 19 or 20 years old. That's been almost 20 years ago."

Given their current clout in country, it's hard to imagine a time when either Chesney or Aldean were still at opening-act status. Both are now mighty enough to sell out stadiums on their own, but they're also doubling down on their drawing power for select dates like the one Saturday at Lambeau Field that pack both Chesney's The Big Revival Tour and Aldean's Burnin' It Down Tour into one co-headlining night.

It's a return trip to Lambeau for Chesney, who became the first major act to play the stadium in 2011 with the Zac Brown Band. It's a first go-round for Aldean,

whose history in Green Bay includes a date with Lady Antebellum at the 2,000-seat Weidner Center in 2008 and a 2012 show at the Resch Center that sold out in an hour and featured another former-opener-turned-stadium-star, Luke Bryan. For the 38-year-old Georgia native who had his eye on a baseball career all through high school — until music took over — the chance to play historic sports venues like Lambeau has a thrill a level above packed arenas and amphitheaters.

"I've always been a huge sports fan. That was always kind of my first love," Aldean said. "For me to go and play some of these places where I grew up watching all these guys play football or baseball, to me, there's something special around those shows, especially when it's an iconic stadium like Lambeau or like when we played Fenway (Park) or Wrigley (Field) or any of those kinds of places. "To me, it's one of those things where I don't know how many times I'll play it in the future. I've never played Lambeau before. I don't know how many times I'll get a chance to play it from here on out. To do it once and sort of cross it off your bucket list is pretty special."

Making the leap to stadiums

Saturday's crowd is expected to be 50,000 strong to hear Aldean and his hardcore band rip through "Hicktown," "Dirt Road Anthem," "Johnny Cash" and "My Kinda Party" — a string of hits that have made him a three-time Academy of Country Music Male Vocalist of the Year. Playing for masses that stretch beyond end zones and center field walls is a far cry from those early days leading up to his self-titled debut in 2005.

"When we first started, back in the day, we would go into a club that held maybe 1,000 people, sometimes less than that, 500, and have a hard time selling that out," he said. "Now to look at how far it has come in the last 10 years and realize you can go in and play a stadium and that many people have been affected by what you do and still want to come see you perform, that's a pretty cool deal.

"I remember watching footage of old rock bands like Guns N' Roses and watching them play these big shows where there were just thousands and thousands and thousands of people. That's kind of what it reminds me of when you look out and see a sea of people. ... We've always got a lot of photographers for those shows to capture that stuff, because it's a pretty cool moment."

Aldean and Chesney have known each other for a long time.

Chesney, 47, is one of those performers every country act strives to match, Aldean said. He's been putting out albums for more than 20 years (2014's "The Big Revival" was his 13th to debut at No. 1), sells more than 1 million tickets to his tours and is the only country act to make Billboard's list of the top 10 touring acts of the last 25 years.

It's both a compliment and something of a throwdown, especially for a self-confessed competitor like Aldean, to be asked to co-headline stadiums with him. Aldean is up first on those nights.

"In a situation like this where you've got someone like Kenny on the shows following you ... of course, you want to go out and blow people away, which in return, makes (Chesney) want to go out and give everybody the best show, too, so I think from a fan standpoint, it's great, because they get to see two guys that

are out there giving 150 percent of everything we've got. We want everybody to leave there talking about the show and what a great time they had. The end result is you want them to come back the next time."

Doing things 'a little off the wall'

Aldean didn't reach A-list headliner without a carefully crafted ascent that was often a lesson in patience. He and his band opened for countless acts — Rascal Flatts, Tim McGraw, Keith Urban, Trace Adkins and Brooks & Dunn among them — and resisted the urge to prematurely start doing their own arena shows. Instead, they would headline theaters but still go out during the summer with a bigger act, Aldean said. Theaters became arenas, then amphitheaters, then multiple nights at amphitheaters and eventually stadiums.

"We tried to do it the right way. A lot of guys these days try to go out and be a quote/unquote 'headliner' before they should. It's hard to go out and be a headliner and play for an hour and a half or two hours when you've got four songs," he said. "There were times where I was ready to go start headlining shows, but waiting another year and getting another tour under our belt and being out with an act that was really bigger than us at the time, really kind of helped to set us up for what eventually was us playing stadiums. ... We knew we had something special. We just didn't want to screw it up by trying to do things too early."

If there's been a constant in Aldean's music, it's that he has taken full advantage of the artistic freedom afforded him by success. Not afraid to take musical risks, his catalog of hard-charging country has veered rock, hip-hop, adult contemporary and straight-up country. His sixth studio album, last fall's "Old Boots, New Dirt," continues to mix it up in a way that makes his style hard to pigeonhole. A good thing, too, because Aldean says the need to label music "really gets under my skin."

"I think right out of the gate it was apparent I was going to do things that were a little off the wall. The cool thing is that everybody sort of allowed us to do that. They've allowed us to do that and not slap us on the hand for it," he said.

"Here's the deal: I love country music, and I love traditional country music. We'll put out a song like 'Burnin' It Down' and then we'll come around and put out a song like 'The Truth.' 'The Truth' is about as country as it gets. The thing is, even though we branch out here and there and go in a different direction, it all comes back around to the fact that it's country. 'Tattoos on This Town,' things like that, those are country songs. We put our little rock flavor on them, but those are country songs," Aldean said.

"I think now it's not that shocking to people when we come out with something (that pushes musical boundaries). I think they've learned to expect that from us a little bit, like expect the unexpected. Don't ever think you've got us figured out, because as soon as you think that we'll change it up on you again. But I love that about us."

DO IT

- Who: Kenny Chesney's The Big Revival Tour and Jason Aldean's Burn It Down Tour, with openers Brantley Gilbert, Cole Swindell and Old Dominion
- When: 4:30 p.m. Saturday; parking lots at 1 p.m. and gates at 4 p.m.

- Where: Lambeau Field, Green Bay
- Tickets: Limited availability of \$257 (Sand Bar), \$177, \$117 tickets; Packers ticket office, ticketmaster.com and (800) 745-3000

TIME OFF WITH ALDEAN

Life on the road is nothing if not hectic. Case in point:

"This morning, I woke up to call you and in the 15 minutes between when I woke up and when I called you, I put out about three different fires of people on the tour needing something," said Jason Aldean. "That's sort of a thing that will happen on show days. You really don't have a lot of time. I'll be sitting on my bus, and if I sit here for 30 minutes, I'll have five different people walk up here and need to talk to me about something."

He finds quieter time for appreciating all the experiences his success has afforded him when he's at his beach house in Florida, where he spends as much of his summer as he can, and when he's hunting whitetail deer (his favorite) and turkey in the fall.

"That's sort of my time to sit back and reflect on everything," he said.