

## REVIEW: Jason Aldean's "Circus" brings big hits, big crowd to Arkansas Music Pavilion

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Earlier this week, my dad asked me what my upcoming schedule looked like. I told him I would be reviewing the Jason Aldean concert on Thursday night (May 19) at the Walmart Arkansas Music Pavilion.

"Jason Aldean," he said, pausing. "Is he the one with the big arms and the tattoos?"

He's halfway to the truth. Aldean does indeed sport large arms and tattoos. But so do fellow country acts Tim McGraw, Brantley Gilbert and Kip Moore, for starters.

So what does Aldean have that the others don't?

After watching his spirited, scripted, yet entertaining show Thursday night at the AMP, I'm not sure I have the answer. But for a sold-out crowd, about half of which sat uncovered and exposed to a rain shower, it mattered very little. Jason Aldean sold out the AMP, or very nearly did. One of Aldean's favorite subjects is partying. He kicked off the evening with "Just Gettin' Started" and played other party anthems such as "1994," "Dirt Road Anthem" and "My Kinda Party." All of them are major country hits, and the crowd responded with great enthusiasm.

Jason Aldean brought a mobile party with him. Dubbed the "Six String Circus," the tour also features Thomas Rhett and A Thousand Horses. There's also a touring DJ/hype man with them called DeeJay Silver. Every two minutes or so, he paused his between-sets showcase of cuts by the Bee Gees, Kid Rock, Ram Jam and Kid Rock to tell the crowd they weren't partying hard enough.

Oh, but they were partying hard, DeeJay Silver. They definitely were.

A group of seven that commandeered the four empty seats to my left must've went through 30 drinks in the two hours they sat beside me. One of them puked, just a little, right in front of their seats. I'm not sure which, and no one left. The party continued.

Aldean certainly caters to the party-hard crowd with his – to use his phrase – dirt road anthems. The evening's proceedings relied heavily on such songs. By my count, between the three artists, there were nine individual references to trucks or tailgates, 10 mentions of wanting to hear a song on the radio and seven lyrical discussions about cut offs, worn-out or just plain old blue jeans. You get the idea.

Jason Aldean Setlist Walmart AMP, Rogers, AR, USA 2016, Six String Circus  
Modern country is loathed in some circles and the only thing worth listening to in others, and there was certainly a formulaic element to Thursday night's proceedings. But, dang it, those songs are popular, and dirt road anthems generally received the biggest crowd reactions of the night, whether from Aldean or Rhett or A Thousand Horses.

But I liked Aldean best during a mid-set interlude where he played a medley of older songs he told the crowd he tried to trim from the current setlist but ultimately could not. During this segment, it was just Aldean on his acoustic guitar and a guitarist and bassist on either side of him. The song-and-a-guitar formula has worked for a century and it worked last night.

Aldean is gunning for the top tier of country music. He brought a truckload full of

toys with him. Particularly, the main video board was just stunning in its resolution. Some concert video boards look terrible, even at close range. Aldean's centerpiece made it look like we were all watching a high definition movie, and one with a great sound system as well. It's impressive stuff. The "Six String Circus" is a carefully planned affair. Even the stairs leading up to the stage's second level had video boards that often showed the same video as those above. These are the kind of things you can buy when you raked in \$43.5 million last year, as Forbes magazine estimates Aldean did last year. That placed him third in earnings for country artists, behind only Garth Brooks and Toby Keith and above marquee contemporaries such as Luke Bryan, Kenny Chesney, Tim McGraw and Florida Georgia Line.

Aldean's star is rising and his universe is expanding. Whatever intangible 'it' factor Aldean possesses, he must have it bunched. His new single "Lights Come On," from an album he told the crowd should debut in a few months, is already on country radio. Just six weeks old, the song is already climbing several country charts, and he chose to play it at the ACM award ceremony, during which he was crowned Entertainer of the Year. The crowd belted that one back at him, too.

You know, maybe my dad will figure out which one he is soon.

Because Jason Aldean's star is on the rise. Still. And he's already one of the biggest acts in country.

Thomas Rhett / Photo by Clayton Taylor

A note about the openers

Guests Thomas Rhett and A Thousand Horses each got brief sets before Aldean's headlining effort. Rhett is a bit of a modern country version of Justin Timberlake (that's a sentence I didn't expect to write today). Rhett raps a little, dances a little and uses a falsetto a little. He also played drums for a song, which was unexpected and not unpleasant.

Rhett started his career as a songwriter, and his solo acoustic version of his "Round Here," which was popularized by Florida Georgia Line, got him the biggest applause of the evening.

A Thousand Horses should be credited for being a giant band. Seriously. Despite playing for just 30 minutes, the group had nine musicians onstage, including three background singers. They too lean into bro country territory, but also edge into Southern rock. Their cover of the oft-covered "Hard to Handle," for instance, was a far more Black Crowes than Otis Redding.