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Jason Aldean: The Rolling Stone Country Interview

Country music's hard-rocking everyman on choosing the right song, his love-him-or-hate-him public image and why he'll never put out an acoustic album



Jason Aldean reflects on the successes and missteps of his career and offers a glimpse into his private life in 2016's Rolling Stone Country Interview. Jim Wright

It's a mild November morning at Jason Aldean's 130-acre estate an hour south of Nashville and the reigning ACM Entertainer of the Year is sitting at his outside patio bar swatting away bees.

"They aggravate the shit out of me," mutters Aldean. He's dressed in a green Guy Harvey T-shirt with mahi-mahi on the back, blue jeans and a baseball hat, and looks more rested and fit than he has in some time. A cup of coffee and a Blu e-cigarette rest on the counter in front of him, both of which he reaches for frequently. A doormat stamped with a giant W – for his surname Williams; Aldean comes from his middle name – lies in front of the sliding door that leads back inside to the den, where his bulldog Bentley lounges by the fireplace and the flat-screen is tuned to South Park.

"I need a damn fly-swatter," he says, flapping his hand at another bee.

Since releasing his debut album for Broken Bow in 2005, Aldean, 39, has had to become expert at waving away nuisances, both in his professional and personal life. That's not to say he hasn't been stung a few times. With his hard rock and hip-hop influenced brand of country music, the Macon, Georgia, native is, to his detractors, the embodiment of how far country has drifted from its roots. His 2011 quadruple platinum mega-hit "Dirt Road Anthem," with Aldean rapping about swerving like George Jones, was as polarizing as contemporary country songs come.

He's also not your typical modern-day mannequin star, all handshakes and smiles – Aldean admits he's more cantankerous than most. "It sounds awful," he says, "but I'm not a warm and fuzzy kind of guy."

His rough demeanor didn't afford him much sympathy then in 2012, when caught up in a love triangle scandal, he became a regular in the tabloids. Aldean and his wife of 12 years divorced in 2013, and the singer married Brittany Kerr in 2015.

But it's those very trials and criticisms that account for Aldean's appeal. He is not perfect. Rather, he is everyman, the mirror image of his fans, striving for a better life but stumbling to get there. In that way, though purists will recoil at the suggestion, he's not unlike Jones – putting his own stamp on songs written by others and stepping in shit in his personal life.

The biggest difference between Aldean and his fan base is clearly visible from this seat at his bar: the castle-like home, the pristine swimming pool, the Range Rover in the garage. Aldean just moved into the home a little less than a year ago and plans to construct an outbuilding that will house his music and sports memorabilia, as well as two bowling lanes. According to Forbes, he made \$36.5 million last year, most of it from touring, and remains one of country's most reliable live draws, selling out Boston's Fenway Park last summer in less than two hours.

Still, Aldean, who drove a Pepsi truck prior to achieving country stardom ("They'd fire you if they caught you drinking Coke," he says) doesn't flaunt his bling. Earlier this morning, spying a Rolling Stone Country journalist, he sprints over from a barn on the property and wrestles open the unwieldy gate to allow him to enter. Later on, he and Kerr hop the house's fence and hustle into a nearby field, binoculars in hand, to check on a potentially injured deer bedded down by the treeline.

"I've never had this," says Aldean, waving his hand this time not at a bee, but at the spread around him. "So I know how fortunate I am. And I know it can be gone in a second. I don't want to sound like I'm a guy who always got the bad end of the deal, but nothing's ever been handed to me easy."

Instead, he's sweated for it.

"When I signed with Broken Bow, I knew I already had one strike against me because I was on a small label and that I was going to have to work harder than all these others guys who had all this big money pushing them from these bigger labels," he says, pausing to take a sip of coffee. "I think that's a big part of the reason people can relate to me – because I do feel I'm like them."

You released your self-titled debut album in 2005 on Broken Bow Records. What do you recall most about that time?

I'd been in Nashville since '98 and I'd had a record deal on Capitol Records and was dropped. I had a lot of things that were promising, but it would kind of go away. A guy would want to sign me to a deal at a record company, and he'd get fired two weeks later before I could even sign. Things like that happened a lot. So it'd been seven years or so of frustration. To finally get a chance to make a record and be on a label, even though it was an independent label at the time, I was excited. Nobody gave us a chance in hell of having success.

You ended up putting Broken Bow on the map. Do you remember who else was signed to the label when you came onboard?

It was Joe Diffie, Elbert West, Joanie Keller, Sherrié Austin and Craig Morgan. They had a couple hits with [Morgan] and they were getting something going. But it was pretty small. You walked in and they had pictures of all the artists in their office there – it was a small wall, you know what I mean? [Laughs] But at the same time, I felt like it was an opportunity for me to go in and be a priority at the label, which is what happened.

What did they see in you that attracted them?

We did a show at the Wildhorse and we invited them out. After the show, [label founder Benny Brown] came back and basically tells me he wants me on the label. Then I didn't hear anything for about a week, which is torture. Because I had heard that before. I heard guys come up and say, "We want you on the label." And then you don't hear anything else. So I was thinking, "Oh, here we go again." I had already had a deal on Capitol, so I knew how that worked. If they really wanted you, lawyers get involved. So until that started to happen, it was all gibberish to me. Your debut single on Broken Bow, 2005's "Hicktown," went Top 10. What was it about that song that connected with fans?

Capitol had tried to change my whole image. I wore the cowboy hat and boots, like now, but when I got there, it was during a time when boy bands were big ... 'NSync and guys like that. They wanted me to not look like a cowboy. "Don't wear a hat!" Every time I went onstage to play I was uncomfortable, it didn't feel natural, it didn't feel right to me. So the one thing I made sure to stress to Broken Bow was, "This is me, this is what you're going to get. So leave me alone and let me do my thing."

"Hicktown" allowed me to come out [as myself]. It was different and more aggressive than anything on the radio at the time. I go back and listen to it and, compared to the stuff we're doing now, it's really light ... when I put it up against "She's Country" or "Lights Come On." But for the time, it was an anthem for a younger generation that maybe wasn't into a lot of the other, slicker stuff on radio. And there was a changing of the guard of artists at the time. You had me, Miranda [Lambert], Eric Church, Luke [Bryan] – all of us hit at the same time. It was a different sound coming into the genre and I think we were at the forefront of that stuff.

You stumbled a little bit with your second album, 2007's *Relentless*. What's your take on that?

We were coming off three Top 10s ["Hicktown," "Why," "Amarillo Sky"] and had a Number One with "Why." We were off and running. I knew we were tapping into something. So how do we keep the momentum going? We had a really cool record and some stuff like "Back in a Cigarette" that was really ahead of its time. The problem was we had a lot of changeover over at my label. A lot of our A&R guys and promotion staff left. I was nervous. But we came out of the box with "Johnny Cash," which was Top 5 for us, and we're still cooking – and then we hit "Laughed Till We Cried" and "Relentless."

There are a couple songs in my career that I just feel like we made the wrong decision on song choice. Not that the songs aren't good, but it was the wrong decision as far as singles. With "Laughed Till We Cried," I feel like we missed it. Even though it was a great song and should have been on the record, I don't think it should have been a single. We had a couple of those on that record.

The title track "Relentless" didn't crack the Top 10.

It's my lowest charting single ever. I thought the song was cool, but I felt like we had better songs that really drove the point home as to who I was as an artist. We had a song on that record called "Grown Woman" with Miranda that was killer. We just missed it. And that was at a time for me where I didn't have as much input on singles as I do now. I'd have to fight a little bit with the label and give in on some stuff to get what I wanted. So at the end of that record, coming off of two songs that just did OK, I was really nervous going into the next album.

But you didn't have to be. Wide Open, released in 2009, had three Number Ones in a row with "She's Country," "Big Green Tractor" and "The Truth."

We knew there was something cool about that record when we went in. There was a feeling around that record that we didn't have with Relentless.

Tell us about "The Truth," written by Ashley Monroe and Brett James. It was a stone-cold country ballad.

That was one of those that I had to fight for. The label wanted "Crazy Town" to be the single, which was not necessarily my first pick, or second pick or third pick. But to get "The Truth" to be a single, I had to agree, "OK, we'll put 'Crazy Town' out." But we were starting to stack them up: "She's Country," "Tractor," "The Truth" ... Number Ones. And "Crazy Town" was Top 5. Shit was starting to clip on all cylinders then. That's when it started to get fun for me. And then we went into the My Kinda Party record.



Which went triple platinum and was named Album of the Year at the CMA Awards. It also featured your biggest-selling single, "Dirt Road Anthem." Did the success of that song and album raise expectations for what was to come?

Oh, for sure. But I think it's a blessing in the fact that every artist wants that one thing where, at the end of your career, you can look back and go, "That was my mark. That was my Thriller."
[Laughs]

For us, "Dirt Road" was such a different kind of song. I'm proud of the fact that we were able to come in and [experiment with R&B and hip-hop]. All of a sudden, everybody else was looking around going, "OK, it's cool to do that stuff." You've seen it a lot with Florida Georgia Line, Sam Hunt. We led the charge. [My Kinda Party] was kind of a perfect record for me. It had "My Kinda Party" on it, which was the aggressive rock sounding stuff that I love. It had "Dirt Road," which

was really different and something that hadn't been heard on country radio before. And the big duet ["Don't You Wanna Stay"] with Kelly [Clarkson]. We got nominated for a Grammy for that thing.

My Kinda Party had an anthem for rural and Middle America, "Flyover States," that feels especially timely today. You told us back in September that the folks you sing about in that song are "stereotyped." Do you think they're marginalized? They played a big role in the presidential election.

The common man is highly underestimated. I heard a lady say it on the news the other day. She's talking about Trump speaking to people who made under 60 grand a year. And she's in New York, and she says, "To be honest, I don't even know anybody that makes under 60 grand a year." No offense, but that's where I came from. And that's the issue. The common person out there, the everyday guy who is going to work and wanting a normal life for his family, he doesn't work on Wall Street ... that guy still has a voice. And there is a lot of them out there who feel like they're forgotten about.

When it comes to elections, anybody just wants to feel like they're being heard, no matter who you are. You saw that in a huge way this time around. Trump, like the guy or not, he was out there busting his butt on the campaign trail, talking to these people and putting it in laymen's terms for them, listening to what they had to say. He wasn't just focusing on the big companies and the big cities. He was digging into the heartland of America. You saw those people come out in a big way to support that because they want to feel like they have a voice too. He shocked the world with that.

Did you vote?

I did not vote this year because we just moved and I wasn't registered in this county. Trust me, I wanted to. This is the first year I haven't since I can remember.

Would you have voted Trump?

I don't know if I'm going to cross that road with you. That's one subject I do stay away from. Politics is a no-win.

Back to "Dirt Road Anthem" then. Because of the song's success, do you feel like you have to have that type of hip-hop entry on every album?

Every album we came out with, there was something we were doing that was a little different. We were at the forefront of a lot of that stuff. The rock sound, the hip-hop/R&B type stuff. I think people come to expect with every album, "OK, what's next?" But it's the song that allows you to travel down those roads. A song like "Burnin' It Down" allows us to do that. You can't take a

song like "The Truth" and turn it into a hip-hop song. It's hard to translate. A lot of times you're at the mercy of the songs you're finding and what's going on at the time.



Michael Knox has produced every one of your seven albums, including your latest, *They Don't Know*. How would you describe your relationship with him?

I'm an extremely loyal guy. Michael was the guy who found me playing in the club in Atlanta back in the day and wanted to work with me to get a deal, and develop me as an artist. At the time, I was a 21-year-old kid playing with my band in the bar, having a good time. He saw the bigger picture and brought me to town. He'd invite me over to his house to eat dinner and take me out to lunch when I didn't have any money. He was like a big brother to me. He went through the ups and downs with me, with the Capitol Records thing and then finally getting to Broken Bow and getting to produce an album together. It's cool when you go through that with somebody and then you have success together.

He's not a guy who is going to come in and try to bully me into recording things that I don't like. He's a great song guy. So when I'm on the road, he's getting songs. Most of the big hits we've had have come from either him finding them or people sending them to me.

What's an example of a song that was sent to you?

"Lights Come On." We were in the studio recording [*They Don't Know*] and I get an email from the guys in Florida Georgia Line. I pull it up, listen to it, and I'm like, 'Hey, come here. Here's our first single.' [Knox] thought we were done; we were finishing the record that day. I said, "We need to make everybody stay today." He's like, "You gotta be shitting me. Are you sure?" I said, "I'm sure."

That's one of those things like with "Dirt Road" – you know right away. It's a different sounding song and people are going to love it or hate it. I'll take 15 of those songs all day long, over a song where somebody is going to go, "Yeah, it's alright." I'd much rather have somebody hate or love a song versus being just elevator music.

Your new single is "Any Ol' Barstool," something more in line with "The Truth" than "Lights Come On," in that it showcases you as a country singer. What drew you to it?

You're right on the money. Our thing is a country-rock sound, which I love, but I never want people to forget that I grew up on traditional country too. George Strait, Haggard, all that stuff. That's what turned me on to music early on. That's why I recorded songs like "The Truth." I know songs like "Lights Come On," "Burnin' It Down" and "Dirt Road" are kind of our vibe, but don't forget this is who I am too. And that's been something I've tried to make sure I did over my career. "Church Pew or Barstool" [off My Kinda Party] was a song I really liked that I was hoping we'd get to as a single. There have been a couple things like that that have been really country. "Two Night Town" on the last record [Old Boots, New Dirt] was really cool. I feel like we kept blowing those songs off. We always went another route. For me, it's important to go back and [remind] people that I'm a country singer too.

When you say "blowing those songs off," are those decisions made out of an expectation related to country radio?

In this business, everybody has got an opinion: people at your label, your friends, your family, the radio station. They all have what they want to hear. You put 10 people in a room, play them the album and ask them to pick their favorites, you'll get 10 different songs. That's the way it is. As an artist, you listen to all this stuff. But for me, I'm always thinking what's going to work best for my live show. Because I don't want to have a live show full of ballads.

So there's a lot of chatter, for lack of a better term. A lot of times it can cloud your judgment. 'Cause I can hear something and go, "That's a single!" Then I play it for everybody and they're picking other songs and I'm like, "Shit. I don't think I'm missing it, but maybe I am." You start overthinking it and I have to be conscious of that. Usually my first impression, my gut instinct has always been right. Not always, but more times than not. I have to remember to trust my judgment on things, and try to keep all that other stuff away. I can go to my record label and talk to five different people and they all have five different songs they like. They're sort of trying to get me to go their route. "You should put this one out" or "so-and-so called me and said this is going to be a huge one." I try to tune it all out and make my decision based on what I think and what I think people want to hear – and what I want to sing every night.

Do you have to convince your producer or the label then to cut songs like "Any Ol' Barstool" or "The Truth"? Where does the pushback come from?

At this point, I've proven myself to all those guys and I've at least earned the respect to say, "I think this should be the single, and here's why." I'm not going to get songs forced on me anymore. I give a lot of credit for that to Benny at the label. He's come up to me anytime we pick a single and says, "I don't really care what anybody wants. I want you to be happy." But I don't know if I get any pushback. You have certain people thinking [the single] should be this, and if you decide to go a different route, it's like, "Well, that ain't what I wanted." Well, tough shit. I don't know what to tell you. It's my career. I've always said if we have a song that dies or doesn't do well, at least if it's a song I picked, I can blame myself. 'Cause if you pick it for me and convince me it's a hit and we put it out and it tanks, I'm gonna be pissed at you. And I don't want that. I don't want to have anybody to blame but me.

You were once driving a delivery truck and now you're onstage in front of thousands. How do you maintain those blue-collar roots when you have this house, this success?

I had a great childhood. We weren't well off by any means. We were very simple. My parents divorced when I was three. My mom raised me as a single parent. My dad lived in Florida, but he was involved. And I saw him a few times a year. We were just simple, man. I didn't get into this business to have this or make a ton of money. I honestly wanted to get up and go to a job and do something every day that I enjoyed. I enjoyed playing music and never in a million years thought it would turn into all this. It's a little like the American dream, as far as you don't have to come from money to go out and achieve goals for yourself. If you work hard enough for it, there is no substitute for that.

Do you still feel like the same guy you were before the fame?

Yeah, I mean, I'm not a flashy kind of guy. My idea of having a good time is having my friends over, us hanging out back here watching football and acting stupid. My idea of a good time is not going to a five-star restaurant in downtown Nashville and rubbing elbows with the who's who of Nashville, 'cause I just don't care. That's not fun to me. That gives me anxiety. [Laughs]

What's your relationship like with your parents now?

It's great, man. They both live about 10 minutes from here. They've always gotten along. They knew that them not being able to stay married wasn't my fault and I shouldn't have to pay for it. I always had a ton of respect for them in the fact that they never made me pay for their mistakes. I have a great relationship with both of them, and it's been good. They've been both pretty instrumental in me getting to this point.

"I wasn't a guy who came in and flew under the radar – we did it bigger and better than most."

You turn 40 in February. How might that change your music?

Thanks for reminding me. I don't feel like I'm 40 years old. I still feel like I'm 30. My knees and back and shit hurt when I get out of bed sometimes, but other than that I'm good. I feel like I have a lot of energy, a lot of gas left in the tank as far as what I want to do. I can go out and play my shows now with as much energy as I've ever had. I look at guys like Aerosmith who can still go out and rock & roll. [Tim] McGraw and [Kenny] Chesney are 10 years older than I am and they're still out there doing their thing. I'm still good to go. But I'm aware of the fact that I'm about to be 40, so I'm trying to be a little healthier. My wife, she's more health conscious than I am.

So she's a good influence?

Yeah. And I'm not drinking as much. I got on a Fireball train for a while. That stuff is like drinking syrup. [Laughs] I'm paying a little more attention to those things. I feel a lot better than I have in a while.

How long do you see yourself touring?

As long as people care and want to come see what I'm doing. If I get to the point where I look out and I'm playing to mostly empty seats, I'll probably reevaluate. That's when I shut it down. But that's the great thing about country music. Your fans support you. When they find somebody they like, they support them through their career. We may not always be playing stadiums, but as long as people care enough to come see the show, then I'll be out there. If I ever get to a point where I feel people are over it and can care less, that's either when I retire or take a little break.

Your personal life was all over the tabloids for a while. How do you navigate that, especially having two young daughters?

[Pauses] I don't know. For me, it's been tough because I'm a pretty private guy. I don't go out and make all my business known. I'm not in the public eye a whole lot. I play my shows and I come here. It's tough when you're a private person and it gets taken away from you. It's been really weird for me. I just deal with it as it comes.

For a while, people were really interested in everything because they felt like it was something juicy and a story, and now I feel like there's no story. It's calmed down tremendously. But it's tough not only for me, but for everybody involved ... for your family to read things that are not flattering and not always accurate either. My kids are old enough to read that stuff and go to school and have kids at school whose parents are yammering about it. On one hand, you try to protect all those people, but on the other hand you don't have a choice but to sit there and take it.

And if you respond at all, you risk looking like an asshole.

At this point, people are going to think whatever they think about me. And I'm not going to spend my time trying to convince them, "No, I'm not like that." I know who I am, and the people closest

to me do, and a lot of things that have happened over the years have been unfortunate and not planned, but it is what it is. Us having to deal with it in the public was unfortunate. I'm not going to sit here and say that could I do it over again, would I do everything exactly the same? Probably not. I would change some things and the way I handled some of it. But I'm not going to say I'd change the outcome – because I wouldn't.

I've never been a media darling anyway. I've been built up by the media and also destroyed by them, in the same sense. When stuff like that happens, I have a tendency to do what I know, which is keep my head down and work. I'm not going to go run and crawl into a hole.

You and Luke Bryan are friends, peers and business partners in Buck Commander. How would you describe your relationship with him?

There's a bond there that I think is hard to describe. [Pauses] When things happen on this level, when shows are selling out in four minutes, when you get that big, your life changes in a hurry. Everything you know is really different. I had to move out of a neighborhood because every time I took my kid out to teach her how to ride a bicycle, all the neighbors would come out and want to corner me up. And my kid is sitting there on a bicycle waiting for me. Everything starts to change. You talk to people about it, and they don't get it. I've had a lot of artist friends in the business that haven't necessarily experienced the success on that level. There's a difference in [hits] like "Johnny Cash" and "Hicktown," and "Dirt Road Anthem." It's a completely different deal.

With Luke, he and I are ones that can pick up the phone and say, "This is what's going on. Have you experienced this? How would you handle that?" Our lives and careers have been parallel. We got to go through all that stuff together. Things that a lot of people don't understand, he and I do. On the other side of that, there are personal things we've gone through together. Luke has had a lot of tragedy in his family over the years. I was around for a little bit of that stuff, as a friend, to talk to him about it. We're co-owners in businesses. We hunt together, own a company, and are looking at doing some other stuff too. It's been a cool friendship.

What do you hope to leave behind as an artist?

When my kids get older, I want them to be able to look back at what I did and realize this was my mark. Now they don't necessarily get it. I'm just Dad and I've been doing this since they've been around. "Whatever, Dad, you've got another show." [Laughs]

And I wasn't a guy who came in and flew under the radar – we did it at the time bigger and better than most. Not only that, we did help to shape the sound of country music for a generation. Hopefully 30 years down the road, people will still be going back and listening to these records, because they heard their parents playing them or they heard a song on the radio and want to know more about it. I set out to do something: be a musician and make a living playing music. Never did I think it'd turn into this. If it ended tomorrow, I have already

accomplished more than I ever thought I could or dreamed of. I provided a great life for my family. To me, that's what it's about. And hopefully the next generation comes along of guys we've influenced.

Do you see that already, your influence on younger artists?

I think it's inevitable. I don't mean that conceited. I think when you have guys like me and Luke and Miranda and Church, we've been the group that is out right now that is going to influence the next generation like Alabama did for me. There is somebody right now sitting in a room listening to our songs trying to figure out how to play them. They'll be the next wave of country superstars.

We've talked about how you want to remind listeners that you're a country singer at heart. Would you ever consider putting out a stripped-down acoustic album?

I like getting in the studio and cutting big records. I don't know that I want to go in and do a semi-acoustic record. I think it'd be cool, and if I did it at all, the only reason would be to open some eyes of some people in the industry that don't view me as a vocalist – they view me more as a loud entertainer. But it wouldn't be because I felt like I wanted to [record an acoustic album]. If anything, I'd probably do a live album before that.

You can release one heck of a greatest hits collection right now though. Why haven't you?

If I put out a greatest hits, that means we're saying, "It's coming to the end, boys." When it's over, I'll give them all the hits and call it a day.