

# Jason Aldean flirting with superstardom

By JOHN GEROME, AP Entertainment Writer

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Nashville, Tenn. (AP) —

With his latest single shooting up the charts, Jason Aldean faces a problem that most entertainers wouldn't mind having.

The 32-year-old country rocker is trying to figure out whether he should tour large arenas as a headliner this summer or continue building his base playing smaller venues and opening for superstar acts like Keith Urban, for whom he'll play a few dates.

"We're kind of at a point now that we can go into the clubs and sell them out for two nights in a row, but we can't necessarily sell out a 15,000-seat arena yet. So we're somewhere in the middle," Aldean explained recently.

"She's Country" could change that. A thumping rocker about a sexy woman in a pickup truck, the single could do for him what "Indian Outlaw" did for Tim McGraw or "Somebody Like You" for Urban — make him into a superstar.

Currently No. 3 on *Billboard's* country chart, the song is Aldean's fastest-rising hit to date and the first single from his new album, "Wide Open," which debuted at No. 2 with 109,000 units sold the first week this month — another best for the Macon, Ga., native (His first two albums, "Jason Aldean" and "Reckless," have gone platinum and gold, respectively).

"I heard that song and it just sounded so different," said Aldean, who's had six singles in the Top 10 since 2005 and toured with megastars like McGraw and Rascal Flatts. "I felt like it was really aggressive, it has some attitude to it."

The new album could push him onto country's A-list. The songs are laced with rural imagery of gravel roads and small towns over a crush of rock guitars. Several sound ready-made for country radio.

"A promoter from Atlanta mentioned to me that he turned away 1,000 people at some giant club that holds 4,000," recalled Country Music Television President Brian Philips. "You can remember hearing stories like that about Kenny Chesney when he was first breaking out. That's the way it begins. ... I think Jason is the classic example of people who see him live becoming rabid fans."

His producer, Michael Knox, says the singer has come a long way since he first saw him in an Atlanta nightclub in 1998.

"Sometimes artists keep repeating the same album. Jason takes on harder songs and bigger melodies. With each album he's finding himself a little more," said Knox, who's produced all three of Aldean's records.

Aldean's ascension wasn't easy. He went through several disappointments before finally landing a deal with Broken Bow Records in 2004. At the time, Broken Bow was an upstart independent label without much of a track record.

"I ended up having a lot of doors slammed in my face and a lot of guys not willing to give me the opportunity to show them what I could do," he recalled. "A lot of these guys I've run into over the last couple of years, a lot of them kind of look at me and shake their heads because they know I was in their office knocking on doors."

Philips said what makes Aldean unique on the country stage is his hard-rocking stage style. CMT sponsored a tour with Aldean and Lady Antebellum last fall.

"His audiences are extremely loud, too," Phillips said. "That's one of the things that sets him apart. His audience roars like a rock audience."

Offstage, the father of two has a quiet way about him. At a recent rehearsal, he waited patiently as his band worked out just the right drum beat, just the right guitar sound. While discussing his success, he seemed exceedingly grounded.

"I'm having fun with it," said Aldean, who wears a goatee and a small silver hoop on each ear. "If it ends tomorrow, I feel like I've had — in the few years I've been around — a pretty decent career. Hopefully, I'll be one of those guys who's around 15 or 20 years, but if not, I feel like I wasn't a one-hit wonder and was able to string together a few hits."