

The Boston Globe

Friday, April 10, 2009

Blurring the line between country and pop

By James Reed

Globe Staff

I'm sure I'm reading way too much into this, but of the three major male country artists who have released records in the past two weeks, Jason Aldean is the only one wearing a cowboy hat on his album cover. Then again, if Keith Urban or the guys from Rascal Flatts did that, they'd have a serious problem: All those blond highlights and fresh-from-the-salon hairdos would be concealed.

As a sage woman once asked — on Top 40 radio, coincidentally — where have all the cowboys gone?

Well, no one would really consider Urban and Rascal Flatts strictly country acts, much less outlaw cowboys. They find their footing and fan bases on country radio, but, like Sugarland and Little Big Town, they're crossover artists with broad appeal. They leave the butt-kicking swagger to Toby Keith and the pleasures of sun, sand, and margaritas to Kenny Chesney.

On Rascal Flatts' aptly titled "Unstoppable," which came out earlier this week, no doubt destined for the No. 1 spot on *Billboard* next week, the multiplatinum-selling trio gets even closer to shedding its country tag.

Tasteful and tuneful, the album is ripe with wide-open choruses perfect for lead singer Gary LeVox to knock into the stratosphere. With violins trumping the fiddle and twangy pedal steel lurking in the fringes, it's clearly a contemporary country album, one suited for stadium-sized singalongs — at the Comcast Center Sept. 12, for instance.

Rascal Flatts does stick to the chief tenet of classic country music: good storytelling, especially when it comes to matters of the heart. "There's a Mountain Dew can with lipstick on it/ Rollin' 'round his truck bed/ He just leaves it back there/ One of the things he has left of her," LeVox sings on the ballad "Holdin' On."

The rest of the songs on "Unstoppable" tend to be declarations of self-empowerment ("Love Who You Love") and mandates to have a good time ("Summer Nights"). Crisply produced, the album's biggest problem is the one that has always dogged Rascal Flatts: All the songs bleed into one another with rarely a shift in structure or mood.

Urban has much better luck with these dynamics on "Defying Gravity," his latest chart-topping album. The Australian heartthrob, now a doting dad with wife Nicole Kidman, lays out his agenda early on with "Kiss a Girl" (as in, he wants to) followed by "If Ever I Could Love."

He balances the good-time rockers with learning ballads. "Sweet Thing" suggests U2 gone country, and "Til Summer Comes Around" opens to strains of a carnival in the distance before melting into a dusky guitar-driven lament.

He never lets the tunes sulk for long, though. "Hit the Ground Runnin'" cranks up the banjo (who knew it could be so brawny?) to compete with the electric guitars, and "Why's It Feel So Long" is the kind of breezy love song Urban is made to sing.

That leaves Jason Aldean, the cowboy-hat-wearing rising country star from Georgia, pretty much in a league of his own on his latest country-rock release, "Wide Open."

Aldean has already racked up several hits with his first two albums, and "Wide Open" sets him up for bigger success. He co-wrote just one of the songs, but he can spot a killer chorus: "Her hair's still wet from her bath/ She's sitting on the front porch/ With a glass of ice tea/ In my sweatshirt and her bare feet," he sings on "This I Gotta See."

While Rascal Flatts and Urban continue to blur the line between country and pop, Aldean definitely knows the difference. In case anyone's confused, he spells it out in "She's Country": "From her cowboy boots/ To her down-home roots/ She's country." Well, at least somebody is.

James Reed can be reached at jreed@globe.com.