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Songwriting Helps War Veterans Find Their Voice; Zac Brown Band Gets A Big Chart Welcome

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MAKIN' TRACKS TOM ROLAND tom.roland@billboard.com

Jason Aldean Uses Small-Town Farming Theme To Make Hay In 'They Don't Know'

Willie Nelson created Farm Aid to bring attention to America's agricultural workers. Jason Aldean seems to sing about them every day on the radio.

"Fly Over States," "Amarillo Sky," "Hicktown," "Big Green Tractor" and the Luke Bryan/Eric Church collaboration "The Only Way I Know" all incorporated one or more elements of rural lifestyle. Aldean has touched on the theme a little more infrequently on his last two albums, though "They Don't Know" — the title track from his current project, just released as that album's fourth single — brings him back to the farm.

"When I was a kid, my mom worked for the Farmer's Home Administration," says Aldean. "I was around that stuff a lot growing up and realized how hard those guys had it, you know. It's just hard to make a dollar growing crops, so it was just something that I always had a lot of respect for. Those are some of the hardest-working people in the country, and they don't get a lot of attention for the things they do."

Growing up on the outskirts of Macon, Ga., Aldean's mom frequently took him to his cousin's house in the country to pick peas and other vegetables, and she froze them for later use, helping the family cut expenses. The business executives in his song "Fly Over States" may not have understood what all the fields and small towns in the heartland stand for, but the bulk of Aldean's audience does.

"Seventy-five percent of the country are very familiar with those places," suggests his guitarist, Kurt Allison. "So it seems odd that people wouldn't have songs that deal with that. I'm glad that Jason stepped up to it."

"We're in the middle of nowhere, and I saw this guy off to the right, plowing a field," recalls Miranda. "It was hotter than hell, and he was out there just sweating and grinding away on his piece of land. I don't know who this guy is, but he looked like he was busting ass out there."

It was a short jump from "I don't know" to "they don't know," and that farm-hand outlook helped seal the lyrical piece of the puzzle. Knowing they were writing for Aldean, they were able to stretch a bit with the melody, pushing the chorus into both a higher range and a higher intensity than the verses.

"Jason can sing," says Boyer, "so we're not scared to go a little high in the chorus."

Boyer played most of the instruments on the demo, with Miranda singing and Allison playing guitar. But when the first draft was finished, Boyer felt the original guitar track no longer matched "They Don't Know" or its content.

"I just felt like it wasn't right and it needed that big intro," says Boyer. "So Kurt came back, and I think Kurt did [new guitar parts] at his house."

They tested it on Knox before playing it for Aldean, who was an easy sell.

"One of the things that I've always been drawn to is a song that kind of sucks you in with the verse and gets you listening, and then pounds you over the head with the chorus," he says. "When that chorus kicks in, it just really kind of takes off like a freight train."

Allison was a bit self-conscious about it when they started cutting "They Don't Know" at Treasure Isle in Nashville. Knowing that it was his song, the band piled on.

