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**Review:** Jason Aldean tour a little bit country, a whole lotta rock and roll -- with A Thousand Horses!

Jason Aldean was six songs deep into his Six-String Circus Tour concert at Ak-Chin Pavilion Friday when he followed "Big Green Tractor" with a brief discussion of how he arrived at the sound that's allowed him to spend the past decade as one of the more successful names in country radio.

"Anybody who's followed my career over the years probably knows, I love country music," he said. "I love country music. I also equally love me some rock and roll music, right? And sometimes when you take country music and take a little bit of rock and roll music and you put 'em together, you come up with something like this right here."

And with that, he and his bandmates kicked into the headbanging rocker that served as his forthcoming album's lead single, the born-to-be-a-concert-staple "Lights Come On," which topped the country airplay charts in late July and gave the tour its name.

There's no shortage of rock in Aldean's brand of country. And by rock, I mean the heavy stuff. That riff in "Lights Come On" suggests there may be some Metallica getting blasted on that tour bus, while "She's Country," his ode to "a bad mama-jama" who's country "from her cowboy boots to her down-home roots," is much closer in spirit -- and sound -- to AC/DC's "Back in Black" than anything remotely country.

But Aldean's open-ended definition of what country means to country fans who came of age in a world where Hank Williams' grandson is now older than most people at a Jason Aldean concert is a huge part of the man's appeal. He's practically post-country, having rapped his way to No. 1 on Billboard's country charts with "Dirt Road Anthem," a quadruple-platinum triumph that remains his biggest hit. And "Burnin' It Down," the most successful single he's released since "Dirt Road Anthem," is built on a prominent drum loop, which he and his bandmates played along to live in Phoenix.

The bottom line is this: As country concerts go, it rocked. And that went over really well with Aldean's fan base.

It helped that the set list was loaded with hits, from his platinum breakthrough, "Hicktown," to the second single he's released from "They Don't Know," the bittersweet ballad "A Little More Summertime." He reached back to his early days for "Amarillo Sky," "She's Country," "Big Green Tractor" and the encore-ending "Crazy Town," but kept the focus on more recent fare, including every single he's released since "Dirt Road Anthem."

And he promised that "you guys are gonna be the first to hear this song by way of introducing yet another track from "They Don't Know," "This Plane Don't Go There," which felt like it could be this album's biggest single yet.

In short, it was exactly what your average Aldean concertgoer would have wanted, despite the absence of a few big hits ("The Truth" and "Don't You Wanna Stay" were the biggest-selling hits he didn't get to). As he noted three songs in, after joking about the weather ("I felt like I got lucky. It was only 98 degrees when we came on stage in Arizona"), if you've been out to one of his shows, then you probably know he's not the kind of guy who's gonna dance around. But if you came to "hear some music, raise a lot of hell and drink some beer?" Then, he's your man. And he will rock you.

The other acts in Aldean's Six-String Circus – Thomas Rhett and A Thousand Horses – are no more beholden to country tradition than he is.

Rhett set the tone for his performance with an EDM track blasting on the PA and quickly completed the mood when he opened with "Anthem," a track from last year's "Tangled Up" that sounds a little like the sort of thing a country guy might write after a DJ saved his life – complete with funk bass, vocoderized vocals and

a club beat. The opening line, which Rhett delivered with a Nashville twang, is "This is the beat that puts the fire in your feet." And much of his performance seemed to take that lyric as a mission statement.

"Make Me Wanna" started with a slinky funk guitar riff, settling into something of a country-disco hybrid one could easily imagine having topped the Hot 100 in the yacht-rock '70s. That disco vibe spilled over into "Tangled Up," during which he climbed behind a second set of drums and slipped into falsetto for a small yet satisfying taste of "Cake By the Ocean," an electro-disco track by DNCE, a new group fronted by Joe Jonas of the Jonas Brothers.

From the soulful balladry of "Die a Happy Man" to the fingerprints he left all over Sam Cooke's "Chain Gang" during "Crash and Burn" and the killer funk bass powering "Vacation," whose opening line is "My girl is rocking that Billabong bikini like she's sponsored," it was clear that Rhett was raised as much on funk and soul and R&B as Aldean was on AC/DC. And he wears it well.

As for A Thousand Horses, I can't shake the feeling that these guys be the Black Crowes of their generation if rock radio still played that kind of stuff and country radio played country. And I mean that in the best way possible.

Fleshing out their crunchy hard-rock riffing with three female backing vocalists, they brought a heavy Southern gospel flavor to the circus. And their front man, Michael Hobby, has the perfect soulful rasp to put across such standouts of their set as "Southernality," "Travelin' Man," "(This Ain't No) Drunk Dial," "Trailed Trashed" and "Smoke," before which Hobby urged the fans who'd trickled in by then to get their cell phones out and "light this place up."

These guys won me over in a big way with their set at this Country Thunder and this set offered all the confirmation I could need that my enthusiasm had not been misplaced.