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Critics' Choice
JASON ALDEAN: NOW YOU KNOW
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by Simon Glickman

They Don't Know, the brand-new set from Broken Bow's Jason Aldean (due 9/9) finds the Nashville superstar refining what he does best—muscular, guitar-heavy jams and ballads filled with yearning, both delivered with down-home directness. But there's no question he kicks it up a notch here.

What stands out in particular is Aldean's vocal prowess; in his unfussy way, he's one of the most affecting male singers in contemporary country, and here he digs a little deeper, providing moments of huge emotional impact.

The material on this Michael Knox-produced set certainly plays to Aldean's strengths. "Comin' in Hot" is a one-listen smash that takes the when-I-get-you-home-I'm-a-lay-you-down trope to new heights. "This Plane Don't Go There" captures the anguish of regret and loss—"this plane can't take me back in time/I could go anywhere/but I can't go back to that night"—and Aldean sings the hell out of it. He navigates the elongated lyric lines of "A Little More Summertime" with aplomb. He's joined by breakout Kelsea Ballerini on the lovely "First Time Again," and the two strike some serious sparks between the bursts of guitar grandeur. Meanwhile, he soars on the classic-rock stomper "The Way a Night Should Feel."

Of course, Aldean effortlessly knocks down crowd-pleasers about drinkin' ("Whiskey'd Up," "Any Ol' Barstool"), lovin' ("Bad," "One We Won't Forget," "When the Lights Go Out") and crankin' it up onstage (the Country radio #1 "Lights Come On"). But it's telling that he named the album after "They Don't Know," a dark, urgent anthem about the struggles of small-town Americans. This set finds Aldean with a deeper sense of purpose, even as he seems to be having more fun than ever.