

# Rolling Stone

## Watch Jason Aldean's White-Hot Alabama Medley at ACM Honors

Performance was one of many highlights at last night's annual ceremonies in Nashville, which honored Luke Bryan, Loretta Lynn, Eric Church, Alabama and more

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When Luke Bryan first won the ACM's Entertainer of the Year award in 2013, he wept tears of joy. "What I always wanted to be was just a country singer that got to ride on a tour bus and show up at a new stage and play music every night," he said, while accepting the award in a state of shock. The now "bona fide country music superstar" — as last night's ACM Honors host Jake Owen dubbed him — was in a more contemplative mood Tuesday evening when he accepted the Gene Weed Special Achievement Award at the ninth annual ceremonies in Nashville.

The event honors the industry suits behind the scenes, songwriters behind the songs, the musicians behind the tracks and the artists themselves in a living-room-loose show where the stars pay tribute to their peers with once-in-a-lifetime performances. Like Jason Aldean and his shit-hot backing band rocking out a stomping medley of "Love in the First Degree," "Tennessee River" and "The

"Closer You Get" to salute Alabama, the recipients of the ACM Career Achievement Award. (Watch the performance above.) Introducing them as "the best band there's ever been," Aldean paid homage to his key influence.

Alabama's founding members — Randy Owen, Jeff Cook and Teddy Gentry — were moved by the honor, to tears in Owen and Gentry's cases. Owen thanked the songwriters in the house, jokingly noting how many hits the band foolishly turned down over the years, before choking up while thanking his father. "He taught me how to play the guitar," the frontman recalled. He then thanked late Academy of Country Music executive director Bill Boyd and late ACM Awards producers Gene Weed and Dick Clark. "We would not be here, and we would not have [had] the career that we had had if it had not been for those three people."

"They told me to keep it short but I'm not going to do that right now," said Bryan, accepting his award named after Weed, the longtime producer and director of the ACMs. The "Strip It Down" singer spent minutes praising the people who make up the backbone of Music Row, from bus drivers to songwriters. "When you win an award on TV," he said, "you don't get a chance to thank the truck drivers, bus drivers and everybody behind the scenes."

Or the caterers, as a lone voice in the crowd shouted, eliciting a quip about those "damn chocolate chip cookies" from Bryan and random cheers from fans across the Ryman Auditorium. The legendary theater itself, colloquially known as the Mother Church of Country Music, was honored as the ACM's Venue of the Year — Small Capacity. "I never thought I'd get even let into the Ryman," Bryan said, noting that this very night marked the 14th anniversary of his moving to Nashville with a dream. To further honor Bryan, powerhouse vocalist Randy Houser turned in a spot-on rendition of the Crash My Party Number One "Roller Coaster."

While two-time ACM Entertainer of the Year and three-time ACM Awards co-host Bryan might be the academy's golden boy of the day, in the Seventies the ACM crowned Loretta Lynn its Artist of the Decade. And last night the still touring 83-year-old coal miner's daughter received the ACM's top honor, the Crystal Milestone Award, while the crowd was treated to an all-smiles, spirited rendition of Lynn's relevant-as-ever 1972 Number One "Rated X" from Miranda Lambert. "She sang songs that were not necessarily appropriate to sing," Lambert said while presenting Lynn with the award, "so I'm so thankful for women empowerment."

That sentiment rang true earlier in the evening when Kacey Musgraves took the stage sporting rhinestones. The only other performer on hand to deliver one of his or her own songs (Restless Heart sang "Bluest Eyes in Texas" for its author, former Arista Nashville honcho and ACM honoree Tim DuBois), Musgraves played her Pageant Material standout "Good Ol' Boys Club" for its co-writer and co-producer Luke Laird, who received the Songwriter of the Year honor. Keeping with the good ol' boys theme, Josh Turner later received a warm response after

bellowing the 1980 Bob McDill-penned Don Williams classic weeper "Good Ole Boys Like Me" for McDill, who was honored with an ACM Poet's Award.

It's probably worth noting that in 2015, 55 years into her career (and 50 years into the ACM's existence), Lynn was one of only three female honorees (of 20 total) at the event. The others were the Ryman's general manager Sally Williams, who received the Don Romeo Talent Buyer of the Year Award, and Felice Bryant. The latter was honored along with her husband Boudleaux Bryant, as half of one of the most influential songwriting duos in country music history, not to mention the first professional songwriters to set up shop in Nashville — Felice and Boudleaux Bryant, who also received a Poet's Award.

In addition to penning the Tennessee state song "Rocky Top," the Bryants, both deceased (and who recently made Rolling Stone's list of the 100 Greatest Songwriters of All Time), wrote scores of iconic hits for Buddy Holly, Roy Orbison, Little Jimmy Dickens, Gram Parsons with Emmylou Harris and, most significantly, the Everly Brothers. Fittingly, perennially pompadoured and obvious Bryant disciple Chris Isaak paid tribute to the duo with a true-to-form take on the Everlys' "Bye, Bye, Love."

The most emotional performance of the night, however, went to Roy Clark. The 82-year-old former Hee Haw host sang for ACM Awards TV producer Barry Adelman, recipient of the Mae Boren Axton Award. Sitting on a chair, and using a cane to walk on and off stage, Clark crooned a version of "Yesterday, When I Was Young" in a quavering rasp that sounded like a lifetime of memories being unpacked and boxed up again in a spellbinding four minutes.

But it was Holly Williams who was the show-stealer. Singing Eric Church's "Like Jesus Does," it was the most unlikely performance of the Honors. The crowd-silencing power of her yearning, effortlessly cutting vocals and some wailing pedal steel swells to match showed the daughter of Hank Jr. and the granddaughter of Hank Williams can take any song and make it her own, transforming Church's confessional into a grand anthem of heartbreak.

Church took home the Jim Reeves International Award. He received the honor for his work as a de facto ambassador for country music, taking his 2014 tour overseas and playing seven countries in Europe (that's a big number for the apple-pie-American genre). While accepting the award, Church recalled the pre-show jitters he had before a gig in Cologne, Germany.

"I think it was the most scared I've ever been. I looked out through the curtain and I saw people that didn't speak English, and I remember thinking, 'This could go one of two ways,'" Church said. "But I smelled marijuana and I thought, 'This is gonna be OK.'"