

billboard Country Update

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BILLBOARD COUNTRY UPDATE

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Jason Aldean Works Back To His Core Sound With *They Don't Know*



Jason Aldean had plenty of cause for head-scratching.

On Aug. 30, the Academy of Country Music started its annual ACM Honors by presenting him the Triple Crown, a cumulative trophy that recognizes acts that have been named new artist, vocalist and entertainer of the year. He's only the seventh artist in that circle, joining such predecessors as Merle Haggard, Kenny Chesney and Brooks & Dunn.

The next morning, Aldean — the reigning ACM entertainer — was absent when the Country Music Association reeled off the names for its 50th annual awards in November. The overlap among voters in the two organizations is significant, thus the shift from winner in one ceremony to nonexistent at the other in a scant four months is astonishing, to say the least.

"It's disappointing," said Aldean on Sept. 1. "I don't understand the way the voting goes any more than anybody else does. I just know that things are going to happen if they're going to happen."



Jason Aldean was toasted Aug. 30 at a Nashville party after he received the Academy of Country Music's triple crown award during the ACM Honors. From left: ACM senior vp creative and content production Lisa Lee, Aldean and CBS executive vp specials and events Jack Sussman.

One thing that's definitely happening is the release of Aldean's *They Don't Know*, an album that marks something of a return to form. Where his 2014 release *Old Boots, New Dirt* leaned more toward ballads and new sounds, *They Don't*

Know veers back to the working-class pride that has been central to his place in the country universe.

Thus, the Sept. 9 release date Broken Bow assigned the project is an appropriate one, arriving just four days after Labor Day.

"I feel like a lot of our audience, a lot of the things we sing about has been very blue collar," says Aldean. "That's how I grew up, so that's what I can relate to."

The middle-class values — affirmed in such previous Aldean hits as "The

Only Way I Know," "Fly Over States" and "Amarillo Sky" — reach their apex in the title track, a sizzling production that characterizes the issues and ethics of a small highway-side town as a mystery to the travelers who pass it by.

It's that same sort of unrecognized reality that Aldean had in mind when he picked *They Don't Know* as the album's title.

ALDEAN: KATIE KAUSI