

# Rolling Stone

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## Jason Aldean on Defiant New Album: 'I Don't Like Labeling'

"I don't care who you are or where you're from, a lot of times people talk down about things they don't really know about," says Jason Aldean, relaxing in a backstage dressing room at Nashville's Ryman Auditorium before the ACM Honors show. "At the end of the day, they don't really know shit."

As country's reigning ACM Entertainer of the Year with 17 Number One songs to his credit, you might be surprised that this superstar still has a hefty chip on his shoulder, but spend some time with him and the picture becomes a little clearer. The 39-year-old Georgia native has earned his spot at the top of country music over 11 years of hard touring and hard rocking, but he's often been misunderstood.

Critics have tried to pigeonhole his music, the press has made his personal life public, and at times even industry peers have seemed to hold Aldean at arm's length. Add to that an outsider's mentality born from a small town Southern upbringing, and you've got the recipe behind the title track to Aldean's seventh

studio album, aptly titled *They Don't Know* and arriving tomorrow (September 9th).

Lounging at the Ryman, Aldean seems far from pissed off — although maybe a little weary as the release date of *They Don't Know* approaches — it's just that people keep trying to put him into boxes.

"I'm a guy that doesn't take any shit off anybody."

"Onstage, I'm one way," he says, dressed for comfort in a ball cap, jeans and camouflaged pair of tennis shoes. "Offstage I'm more laid back, but I'm also a guy that doesn't take any shit off anybody and I'm very outspoken. If you wanna know something, I'm gonna tell ya. I might not always tell ya in a way you want to hear, but I'm just being honest. I think a lot of times that may come across as a little brash, which is not intentional."

The same mistakes have been made regarding his music, he says, which is often downplayed by journalists as party-anthem shtick or with a lazy "bro country" label. Aldean doesn't really have an answer for what it is that he does — he says it just comes natural — but music writers who clearly have no intention of listening with an open mind get him riled up quick, and there are plenty of those.

"I know our stuff is a little more aggressive than most when it comes to production and song choice," he says. "I don't think anything we've ever cut has been pretty and sweet, but I don't like the labeling stuff."

Then there's his relationship with the music industry itself, which sometimes seems to only accept him grudgingly. He was on the ACM Entertainer of the Year ballot five times before finally winning last April. (One year, his opening act won, but the sting wasn't so bad since it was his good buddy, Luke Bryan.) And fans were stunned to find out that Aldean received a grand total of zero nods when the CMA Awards nominees were announced last week.

"I'm not one of those guys who's always up in everybody's face."

He doesn't play the game in the same way as most, he explains, and that tends to create friction just about everywhere.

"I'm not at every little party and every little thing that goes on around Nashville," he admits. "I do my thing, I get off the bus and, man, I want to be home. I travel for a living, so when I'm off the road what's more important to me is spending time with my kids and my family. That's more important to me than coming to a Number One party for whoever in Nashville. I mean, if I'm here and I can make it happen, absolutely, but I'm not one of those guys who's always up here in everybody's face at every little shindig that goes down."

"You give me a few minutes and talk to me, you start to understand it more. But from the outside looking in, if you just read headlines or read things I say or watch clips of concert footage, whatever it is, then it may be a different story. And I hate that, but that's just what it is."

Over 15 tracks, Aldean's *They Don't Know* may be a chance to recapture his own narrative. The new tunes admittedly put that brashness back in the spotlight, but also show that there's more to him than meets the eye.

He thinks of *They Don't Know* as a return to form sonically, calling it "vintage me" and claiming to have gotten ever so slightly away from what he does best on his previous set, *Old Boots, New Dirt*.

But while the new album certainly hits all the traditional bullet points — from love and heartbreak to wild Saturday nights and hungover Sunday mornings — one of its most powerful "Aldean moments" comes wrapped up in his misunderstood angst. The title track is a strutting, us-against-them anthem in defense of rural life, a kiss-off to city slickers who look down on — or worse, past — their country cousins, and a revealing look into Aldean's underdog head space.

"They get stereotyped, for sure," he says of flyover-state folks. "Farmers and people like that really are the backbone of the country. People just assume when they go to Whole Foods to buy a banana or some corn, it just magically appears. It's like, 'No, there's a guy growing it who's busting his ass, and this is what he does for a living.' People from the South a lot of times get that, and me being from the South, I guess that's why it annoys me more than anything."

Elsewhere on *They Don't Know*, longtime fans will notice more beats and drum loops (just keeping up with the times), and a more melodic vocal approach that the singer seems especially fond of, but the focus is still placed squarely on small town storytelling, aggressive guitars and pounding drums, and it's all geared toward his high-energy live shows.

"Lights Come On" started things off with a "big, uptempo" chart-topper in the vein of "She's Country," and was then swiftly followed by second single, "A Little More Summertime," a 90-degree turn that cranked up the nostalgia to deliver a dose of windblown, beach-town melodrama.

Aldean enlists rising star Kelsea Ballerini for an epic duet — call it part two of the "Don't You Wanna Stay" (his collab with Kelly Clarkson) saga — called "First Time Again." A track titled "Comin' In Hot" lands squarely in the playful romance territory of "Big Green Tractor," and "Bad" recalls the steamy sex appeal of "Burnin' It Down." Further on down the rabbit hole, "Whiskey'd Up" feels like a modern take on the tear-streaked barroom ballad, and "The Way a Night Should Feel" covers the requisite tailgate-blaster component, providing elements of both variety and consistency, and making it harder than ever to slap a one-or-two word label on the finished product. . . And maybe that was the point.

With *They Don't Know*, it's almost as if Aldean is re-centering himself in the wake of his greatest success to date. His ACM Entertainer victory brought him to the mountaintop, now he's ready to get back to reality.

Back in the Ryman dressing room, crew members pacing impatiently signal that sound check awaits and it's time for the star to get back to work. He'll put his brash onstage persona back on, and even though it's only part of who he really is, he's done worrying about critics and bloggers and suits. If they still don't get him after 11 years, they likely never will.

