

Jason Aldean warms sold-out Blossom with a hot show (photos, concert review)



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CUYAHOGA FALLS, Ohio – You know it's that time of year when spring has sprung, summer's come and fall has fell when you have the last show of the season at Blossom Music Center.

Yeah, it means that Jack Frost, Yuletide carols, sleigh bells, salt trucks and all that other happy, uh, stuff, are right around the corner. And you could feel them in the chill of the night air Saturday.

Fortunately, country star Jason Aldean was there to ward off some of those evil, evil, EVIL thoughts.

For 90 minutes, Aldean kept the idea of winter at bay for a sold-out crowd, running through nearly two-dozen songs off a catalog that began just 10 years ago with the release of his self-titled debut album.

By the way, let's talk about that "sold-out crowd." Just about every country show this year has sold out the picturesque amphitheater – which is even more beautiful now because the leaves are starting to turn. But this time, it was packed. I mean P-A-C-K-E-D packed!

Blossom's capacity is somewhere around 20,000, but it's an iffy 20K. It all depends on how closely the folks who occupy the lawn choose to sit. Maybe everyone was feeling really friendly, but I've not seen the venue as sardined as it was Saturday evening.

Maybe that's because nobody wants to see summer come to a close. That dream is common in Northeast Ohio, not that it ever does much good. Ol' Man Winter still rears his hoary head despite our pleas and protestations.

So it will be good to go into it knowing that we can call up on the memory of shows like Saturdays, which began with "Hicktown," the first hit in a career that has now seen Aldean go from having his truck repossessed (read the lyrics to "Crazy Town") to being named one of country's top earners by Forbes magazine and ended with "She's Country."

The tour, dubbed the "Burn It Down Tour," began in Virginia at the beginning of May, and it's clearly taken a toll on Aldean's voice. Unique as it is, there are times that the nasality that makes his delivery so distinctive was lacking, and sometimes a bit pitchy. Moreover, there was a rasp in his voice as well a few times as he strained to reach higher notes that could be cause for worry.

But there's another side to all that. Specifically, there's a new maturity in his voice. Even on some of his "older" material, like "Tattoos on This Town," which came out five years ago, that maturity – call it a rasp, call it a tired voice, call it whatever – adds a new dimension to his music.

It's no exclusively longer party boy, "bro-country" (a term he, like fellow Georgian Luke Bryan, despises).

Of course, you can't get away from some of that, just by the nature of the beast. "Big Green Tractor," "When She Says Baby" and "Just Gettin' Started" are always gonna have vestiges of that.

But his "new" sound – no matter whence it comes – has put new colors around songs like "Amarillo Sky" and even "Johnny Cash." Plus, songs of his latest album, "Old Boots, New Dirt," like "Tonight Looks Good On You" and "Gonna Know We Were Here" are hopeful signs of what this Aldean might become.

Still, even this more mature Aldean understands the fans' affection for songs like "Dirt Road Anthem" and "She's Country," which he will have to do till he retires, and he throws himself into them as the entertainer he is.

That's not to say everything is hunky and/or dory. His own tunes "The Truth" and "Night Train" were a little weak in the delivery department, and his cover of Bryan

Adams' "Summer of '69" was flat-out awful – he started out singing in the wrong key.

It's good that Aldean is on his game, too. Both of his openers – young Tyler Farr and especially veteran songwriter Cole Swindell – showed promise, even if Farr had a bit of trouble staying on key.

Swindell in particular seems poised to take the next step. He's always been a good songwriter – he wrote "This Is How We Roll" for Florida Georgia Line, for example. But now he's keeping his treasures, like "You Ain't Worth the Whiskey," a tune sure to be loved by every guy – and gal – who's ever decided to rise above being dumped.

So bring it, Ol' Man Winter! You ain't got nothin' we can't handle . . . till next year.