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## Jason Aldean Revives a Classic Theme With 'Gonna Know We Were Here'

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It's hard to hear Jason Aldean's "Gonna Know We Were Here" and not tie it to his past. Two kids with a car raising a ruckus is similar to the couple in his 2007 single "Johnny Cash." The chorus' opening salvo -- "Ain't scared to ride this train" -- uses the same imagery as his 2013 release "Night Train." And the next line -- "Make a few marks, leave a few stains" -- bears a resemblance to 2011's "Tattoos on This Town."

Small-town characters have been pushing the limits in Aldean's songs since he first cranked up the party a decade ago with "Hicktown." After delving into love and sex on the first three singles from *Old Boots, New Dirt*, "Gonna Know We Were Here" has Aldean unapologetically treading familiar turf.

"As much as 'Burnin' it Down' and 'Just Gettin' Started' and 'Tonight Looks Good on You' were great songs, I think this is kind of a song that gets us back to what we do best, which is the uptempo energy kind of things that got a little bit of edge, a little bit of attitude," Aldean says.

"Gonna Know We Were Here," in fact, had Aldean's influence all over it even at its starting point in the fall of 2013. At the time he had started working on the album, and songwriter Brett Beavers ("Red Solo Cup," "5-1-5-0") was angling to

land his first Aldean recording. Since Aldean doesn't write his own material, he's a prime target for Music Row writers, and there was plenty of competition.

"You can kind of feel the town moving a little bit when Jason is getting ready to do an album," Beavers says. "Everybody starts going in that direction and just really hammering for a few months up until he cuts."

As earthy as the topic might be, "Gonna Know We Were Here" originated on a different plane. Beavers had been contemplating mortality and the fact that as people pass, most of their contributions to the world are lost or forgotten.

"I had that thought rolling around in my head for a while from a spiritual standpoint, like, 'Hey, 100 years from now it's not going to matter,'" he says. "I kind of coupled that with wanting to leave a mark. We want to do something significant or something to where they'll remember us."

Beavers brought up the idea when he arrived for a writing appointment at the home of Brett James ("Bottoms Up," "Something in the Water").

"We kind of got into a long, deep conversation about that," James remembers. "How much of our existence is going to be remembered long term?' We had a conversation about that, and then it turned into a Bonnie & Clyde, tear-up-the-world kind of song."

James' writing room, on the second floor of a converted barn, is loaded with natural reverb, and after they both acknowledged their desire for an Aldean cut, the room's spacious sonics helped them craft a song with an appropriate intensity.

"We're just banging on a couple of acoustic guitars, but it's a big room, sounds great," recalls Beavers. "Brett sings really loud and awesome, so that's very inspiring."

James winnowed down the time frame from a century to 20 years -- a much easier span to grasp -- and the words and phrases started flying: "pedal to the metal," the train barreling down the track, a roller coaster and a "shooting star across the sky." The whole thing was built for speed.

"That's probably the overall theme of that song -- 'Let's live fast,'" James says. "It's not necessarily 'live fast, die young,' but if we do [die young], that's OK. Overall, it's a personality rather than a specific lyric."

Which is why there's a reference to "the dirty South," a phrase that James wedged into it. It has some character, but neither writer is really sure what it means.

"I just love the phrase," James says. "When I think of the dirty South, it's not lofty columns and old Southern plantations. It's sort of where the South meets the streets a little bit, where you get your street smarts and where people are really living their life."

With engineer Mark "Schmarx" Schneider helping to make it sound large, they stacked a bunch of instruments that day for a rather elaborate worktape, and Beavers' publishers -- Big Deal Music senior vp Pete Robinson and Dale Bobo -- got it to Aldean's camp. Producer Michael Knox auditioned 4,800 songs for the album, so the odds of "Gonna Know We Were Here" making it were slim on paper. In reality, the song was practically a slam-dunk.

"It was a weird time in the town for songwriting," Knox says. "A lot of people were writing to drum loops for the past two years and we weren't getting uptempos, we were getting a lot of mids."

It also anchored the "old boots" part of the equation a bit, keeping the rebel spirit in place as Aldean explored other themes and textures on *New Dirt*.

"Obviously I'm drawn to those songs and we've kind of largely built my career on stuff like that," Aldean says. "You're only here for a minute, so make it count."

Rich Redmond's drum roll kicked it off when the band attacked "Gonna Know We Were Here" at Nashville's Treasure Isle, setting a tone that carries through the slashing power chords and through the rising intensity of Adam Shoenfeld's fiery guitar solo.

"Redmond's in there playing drums like he's in front of 20,000 people -- he's spinning sticks, he's pointing at everybody, he's freaking going crazy in there," Knox says. "You've got to track for six, seven hours and Redmond's killing it. He looks like he's running down a marathon after we track every song. He's in there sweating to death; he changes shirts throughout the day. He's a lot of the energy in the room."

They amped up the bridge, too, pushing Aldean's voice into a strata that captures the urgency of living for the moment.

"If I get up there too much, it starts to not sound good; it starts to get a little nasally," Aldean says. "And then there's some times where you just kind of find that sweet spot where you can get up there and it still sounds good. That was one of those songs that sort of allowed me to jump up there a little bit -- it raises the energy level in a song when you can keep the register up a little higher like that."

With some stations playing it pre-release, the single charted even before *Broken Bow* officially sent it to radio through Play MPE on Aug. 3. While reviving a

familiar topic, it also arrives at a time when Aldean figures high school seniors will be plotting their yearbook themes.

“Everybody wants to feel like they’ve sort of left their mark on the world when it’s all over,” he says.

The single is No. 22 on Billboard’s Sept. 20 Country Airplay chart. When it’s all said and done, “Gonna Know We Were Here” seems poised to leave a mark of its own.