

Review: Jason Aldean 'Burnin' it Down' in Phoenix

Serene Dominic, Special for the Republic 10:15 a.m. MST September 28, 2015



No one ever accused Donny Osmond of being a visionary but he surely predicted the future when he erased the dividing line between a little bit country and a little bit rock and roll. Nowadays at most country concerts, including Saturday's Ak-Chin Pavilion performance by Jason Aldean, you also can factor in a little bit of rap, a little bit of R&B, a little bit of metal and a little bit of dubstep and all you're left with is a teensy weensy little bit of country and a lot of everything else.

And maybe that's why Aldean is such a modern country standard-bearer. His calculus of how much country to leave in without seeming old hat is a better than average ratio. And the fact that he isn't grinning like a damned fool throughout the entirety of his set means he's gonna sing at least some songs with some gravitas behind them that goes beyond not packing enough beer in the cooler.
<http://www.azcentral.com/story/entertainment/music/2015/09/28/review-jason-aldean-burnin-down-phoenix/72936566/>

Which brings us to grinning galoot opener Cole Swindell, a name that recalls some moustache twirling villain trying to extricate the deed to your ranch but actually turns out to be this aw-shuckster no party animal worth his spitting tobacco could ever take offense to. He started out writing these bro anthems for the likes of Luke Bryan, Thomas Rhett and Florida Georgia Line before becoming a guy who just sings his own bro anthems, most of which were heard on

Saturday, such as "Hey Y'all," "This Is How We Roll" and "Brought to You By Beer." That last one came complete with a yakety coda from Swindell. After extolling the virtues of all-day drinking turning into all-night binging while eyeing girls who can get guys with six packs instead of guys who can just about manage 12-ounce curls, Swindell exclaims, "Hey guys these girls just may be out of our league so we might as well keep on drinking!" Why is this man still smiling so much at this glum face-up? George Jones could've squeezed four tearjerking masterpieces out of that one line of exposition.

And just when you thought Swindell was going to launch into something other than a tailgate invite, a song where love exists outside of the bed of a truck and one mile of off-road, he launched into a sensitive breakup song. But it was "You Ain't Worth the Whiskey," where he managed to rag on an ex and salute the troops at the same time. "I'm raising my glass to those savin' our ass overseas," he sang.

Swindell has enough reasons to smile. He's living the dream, et al. But there's gotta be more to country than Things You Can Do in A Silverado. That shouldn't be a song template. That should be a "Jeopardy" category.

All thoughts of Swindell were soon forgotten (except when he was brought back onstage later) once Aldean took the stage, looking like the last man standing on Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Street Survivors" album cover. Backlit with fire both filmed and fueled, he bounded onstage with the unapologetic "Hicktown." Yeah, we got another party anthem but we also got its underbelly; seeing the "neighbor's butt crack" as he's "nailing down shingles" while his wife is "smokin' Pall Mall's and watching Laura Ingalls." The song gives enough details to let you know that he knows the rich people are doing it up better somewhere else and that this party is only being brought to you by beer because there was enough money left over to put some gas in the car.

Even the encore, "Dirt Road Anthem," one of the few country-rap songs that doesn't sound like an egregious mistake, has enough details of the downtrodden to make you think Aldean has at least read "The Grapes of Wrath" and has known some grit in his life. In a lyric like "I'm hittin' easy street in mud tires," you feel the escapism and the reason why you need escape. Aldean manages this delicate balance with every song so it doesn't feel like he's going down a country-music checklist and adding a verse because he forgot to mention girls with painted-on jeans.

Aldean thought they had played it smart coming a little later in the year but didn't expect another hot streak weather-wise. "How smart is it bring the "Burnin' it Down" tour to Phoenix when it's 105 and 150 degrees onstage," he said noting the Sternos-on-steroids fire blasters he had.

The heat did have an effect on some people down front. During Aldean's first venture of the night into adult contemporary territory with "Tonight Looks Good on You," someone down front fainted, coincidentally right around the time as reports of paramedics rushing to Tempe Town Lake for some Summer End Festival medical emergencies. Oh full moon, we're nothing but 90 percent water to you and you keep playing with the tide!

Another thing that lends Aldean gravitas beyond the not smiling so much is that a song about pulling an all-nighter like "Just Gettin' Started" and "Dirt Road Anthem" is cast in a minor key. There's some underpinning of melancholy with the pedal steel which is as integral a part of a song like "Amarillo Sky" as the lead guitarists shredding on both sides of the stage.

Aldean's cover of Bryan Adams' "Summer of '69" may have been included to further his rock credibility although his band did that from the first few opening chords. Unlike most new country artists, who strap on an axe but it may as well be a fanny pack for all the difference it makes, you can hear Aldean's acoustic even when he joins his twin-guitar army at the lip of the stage.

Aldean doesn't shred but he doesn't pose like he shreds either. And his earpieces are shaped like guitar picks. That's gotta tell you something about his priorities.

At the end of it all, Phoenix got burned by fiery guitar licks and Aldean's brand of smoking hot country.