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Jason Aldean, country's 'hardest-rocking big star,' knows what works

BY KELLIE B. GORMLY | Wednesday, Sept. 21, 2016, 6:30 p.m.

Jason Aldean is cementing his role as a monarch of hard-rocking country, with his brand-new album and his Six Ring Circus tour coming on Sept. 24 to First Niagara Pavilion, industry officials say.

"I think in the country music field, he's probably the hardest-rocking big star, and he's very successful at it," says Michael McCall, an editor and writer at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in Nashville.

Aldean, a Georgia native, mixes country with elements of hip-hop, rap and hard rock, McCall says.

"He's singing about the South, singing about the country ... but he presents it in a very aggressive and hard-rocking way," he says.

"They Don't Know" — Aldean's seventh studio album — debuted at No. 1 on the Billboard 200 album chart on Sept. 9. The 15-track album includes the No. 1 single "Lights Come On" and "A Little More Summertime."

McCall calls "They Don't Know" a specimen of Aldean's roots, rather than an experimental record with a different flavor to it.

“In this case, it is bread and butter, meat and potatoes,” he says. “Simple rocking country style ... very basic, straightforward Jason Aldean.”

Aldean's path with his recordings is unusual, because, despite his high profile, he remains with an indie label, McCall says. Nashville-based Broken Bow Records gives Aldean creative freedom that major labels often won't allow, McCall says.

“He's broken that barrier and shows that you can have 10 years of playing records without having to hook up with the big corporations,” he says.

Despite his popularity, Aldean, 39, has his share of critics, who deride him for “bro country.” But don't even think of using the label to describe Aldean and other country acts close to his age, such as Luke Bryan and Florida Georgia Line, as Aldean finds it derogatory, says Jeremy Mulder, a disc jockey with the regional Froggy radio stations.

The term “bro country” is used, usually in a negative way, to describe male country performers who sing about stereotypical dude things, such as trucks, women in Daisy Dukes and beer.

Not that Aldean doesn't sing about those things; after all, he is a young man, Mulder says.

“They're singing about things they like. ... I mean, what do you want them to sing about?” he says. “I think part of country music is telling a story that you can relate to. That's what they relate to now ... being young men.”

Aldean brings that rock-'n'-roll edge to country music, and his shows are full of energy and fun, Mulder says.

“I like the way he makes me feel,” he says. “He's upbeat.”