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How Jason Aldean changed country music

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Eight years ago, Jason Aldean stood on stage before a nearly empty room, working through the rapid-fire lyrics to “She’s Country,” a song heavy on distorted guitar and fiddle that delves into the desirable attributes of a country girl. He planned on debuting the song at the 2008 Country Music Association Awards a few days later.

As Aldean spit now widely known lyrics “Get ya flippin’ kinda trippie like a Mississippi hippie,” his manager Clarence Spalding wondered out loud whether the song was too rock for the awards show and country radio.

The aggressive rock sound of “She’s Country” etched a new boundary for what constitutes country music, and it was so embraced by the genre’s fans that its success helped push Aldean into the headlining spot on his first arena tour. Aldean is now the Academy of Country Music’s Entertainer of the Year. And when heard in a mix of current songs on country radio, its finger-picked intro and unmistakable fiddle make “She’s Country” perhaps the most country-sounding song on the day’s playlist.

Years later, fans are still hungry for the Georgia native's rock-infused version of country music. His new album, "They Don't Know," released Sept. 9, became his third to top the Billboard 200, Billboard's all-genre albums chart.

"It was a big roll of the dice for us," Aldean recalls of "She's Country." "We thought it was cool. We knew it was different than anything else we were hearing at the time, but little did we know that in a lot of ways it would create the standard for what is country radio today."

He's not wrong. According to country radio trade publication Country Aircheck, Aldean's songs have been played more times at country radio in the past 10 years than any other artists'.

"Obviously, his sound is the mainstream," said Country Aircheck Vice President Chuck Aly. "What Jason has done speaks to the general evolution and shift of culture. Did he single-handedly revolutionize something or was he at the front end of something in terms of what people his age who grew up with his influences were gravitating towards anyway?"

Either way, Aly said, Aldean's early creative risks, including the hard-edged "She's Country" and the rap-infused "Dirt Road Anthem," opened the door for today's progressives, including Sam Hunt.

"All the people who are complaining that it's not the way it was when it was Waylon and Willie, well back when it was Waylon and Willie there were people complaining about Waylon and Willie," Aly said. "They weren't like what had come before."

Sometimes, Aldean is the one complaining. Even he thinks today's country acts push too far. As a country radio listener, he hears pop-oriented country, rock, blues, hip-hop and R&B. He remembers when the bulk of radio playlists were "pretty traditional" and that occasionally someone put both feet outside the box.

"The lines are blurred," he said. "You don't even know what country music is anymore. There's a ton of different influences right now that are flooding country music. It's cool to have that in a lot of ways as long as ... at some point the core of it remains country."

Over the years, Aldean has tried to "pick his spots" to go outside the country box. He calls his own "Burnin' It Down" a "damn R&B song." But Aldean always made an effort to land squarely back in the guidelines of the genre. Carson James, senior vice president of promotion at Aldean's label, Broken Bow Records, calls "She's Country" the "Back in Black" of country music but also pointed to Aldean's hit "The Truth," which he said is "country as grits."

"Jason is a country singer, there's no doubt about it," said Aldean's other manager, Chris Parr. "He just happens to have a wall of guitars behind him most of the time."

Jason Aldean performs at the CMA Music Festival at

Jason Aldean performs at the CMA Music Festival at Nissan Stadium on June 9, 2016, in Nashville. (Photo: Larry McCormack / File / Tennessean.com)

Aldean made sure there are plenty of his signature grits on "They Don't Know." "Any Ol' Barstool" and "All Outta Beer" are studded with steel guitar and among the collection's most country offerings. But the singer hasn't eschewed loops, either. And, there's still plenty of the guitar-heavy uptempos for which he's known.

Aldean's 2014 release "New Boots, Old Dirt" was home to the multiweek No. 1 "Burnin' It Down," and he thought the album was lacking his "stamp" of hard-charging fast songs. He felt like he missed the mark with song selection. The album was released during a time of intense public scrutiny on Aldean's personal life. The singer was previously caught in an affair with a woman who is now his wife. In 2014, they weren't yet married and Aldean felt that every song choice was going to be overanalyzed. Fear steered his song choices, and his personal life and outside opinions hampered his focus, he said.

"It just felt like we got away from what I do," Aldean said of "New Boots, Old Dirt." "With ('They Don't Know') I wanted to get back to that, and focus on going in and making ... something that was my kind of record. I felt like this album was the album that should have come next."

"He is in a better place now mentally and that draws different types of songs," explained Aldean's longtime producer Michael Knox. "But that's what makes him such a great artist is that he has no issues at all putting it out there and wearing his emotions on his sleeve."

Jason Aldean and wife Brittany Kerr on the red carpetBuy Photo

Jason Aldean and wife Brittany Kerr on the red carpet at the 51st Academy of Country Music Awards at Las Vegas' MGM Grand Garden Arena on April 3, 2016 (Photo: Larry McCormack / File / The Tennessean)

For Aldean, the elephant conjured by his personal life has left the room.

"You said that, not me," he said with a laugh when pressed on the issue. "There is nobody it's better for than me."

In addition to being able to record songs more freely, Aldean won the Academy of Country Music's Entertainer of the Year trophy in the spring and was presented with the organization's Triple Crown Award in August for winning ACM trophies for New Artist of the Year, Male Vocalist of the Year and Entertainer of the Year over the past decade. Aldean was in line to win Entertainer of the Year for 2012 but was trumped by Luke

Bryan, who at the time was his recent opening act. (Bryan, now a stadium headliner, also won the trophy for 2014.)

Aldean was among the first to congratulate his friend, but wondered if his time for the top award would ever come. When he heard his name called in April, he was shocked and said it was one of the highlights of his life. That night — as with "She's Country" about eight years before — he debuted his new single "Lights Come On" on a nationally televised awards show, this time the ACM Awards.

"At the end of the day, it's been a pretty damn good career," Aldean said. "All things considered, all the uphill battles and the slides and the back up again. All of that stuff has been pretty good. I came from a small label that honestly, nobody in this town thought I had a chance in hell to have the career I've had. I've done it on my terms."

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Jason Aldean's signature sound typically includes a sonic wall of electric guitars. Recently the "A Little More Summertime" singer put the amplifiers in time out for an acoustic five-song performance for Pandora Sessions. The set list includes multi-week No. 1 song "Burnin' It Down" and "Dirt Road Anthem" as well as new songs "A Little More Summertime," "Lights Come On" and "This Plane Don't Go There" from his most recent album "They Don't Know."