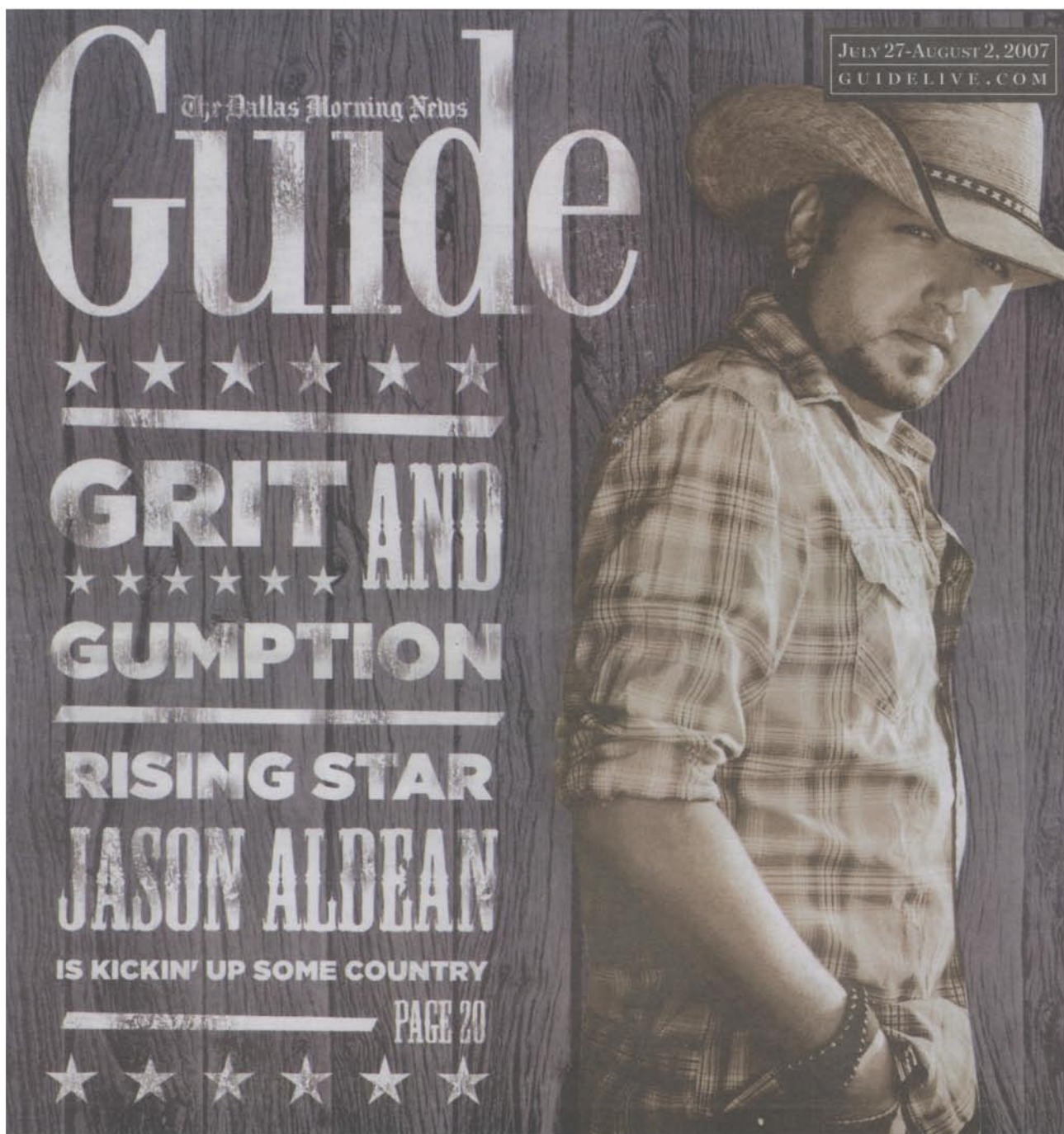


The Dallas Morning News



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Guide

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

**GRIT AND
GUMPTION**

**RISING STAR
JASON ALDEAN**

IS KICKIN' UP SOME COUNTRY

PAGE 20

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

The cover features a photograph of country music artist Jason Aldean. He is wearing a light-colored plaid shirt, a cowboy hat, and a watch. The background is a dark wood grain texture.



Jason Aldean brings his gimmick-free show to American Airlines Center tonight as the opener for Rascal Flatts.

Kristin Barlowe

Music

★ EARNING ★

HIS SPURS

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Hard work and straight-ahead music put Jason Aldean in saddle of success

By MARIO TARRADELL
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Country newcomer Jason Aldean doesn't bank on gimmicks or catchphrases. That's obvious. Give a quick listen to the Georgia native's two CDs, and what you'll hear is straight-on honky-tonk country mixed with heavy helpings of Southern rock. No muss, no fuss.

So we won't begrudge him when he calls his sound "aggressive country." When it comes to *Relentless*, his sophomore disc, it isn't hyperbole.

Right from the get-go, the heartland rocking single "Johnny Cash" sets the tone for the next 11 tracks. *Relentless* crackles with more grit and gumption than his promising debut, the million-selling *Jason Aldean*. It showcases a comfortable singer with a reedy baritone slipping into songs about life ("Laughed Until We Cried"), heartbreak ("Back in This Cigarette") and perseverance ("I Use What I Got") like he fits into an old pair of Wranglers.

"I grew up in Macon, Georgia, which is a hotbed for Southern rock music, and I love country, I love George Strait and those kind of songs," the 30-year-old says by phone from a tour stop in Missouri. "The way we recorded these new songs gave them more of an edge. It can still be country, but you don't have to have fiddles."

Anybody who's seen Mr. Aldean and his band onstage can attest to his verve. He puts on an

energetic show devoid of props, fancy lighting and big video screens. He's had plenty of time to hone that platform performance. Schooled in the bars of his hometown — he skipped college and immersed himself in music — Mr. Aldean played 200 gigs last year.

He's been doing it the grass-roots way since signing with Nashville independent label Broken Bow Records. Sure, his first three hits, the barn-burning anthem "Hicktown" and its follow-up successes "Amarillo Sky" and "Why," got significant radio airplay. But he put plenty of mileage and sweat into constructing his budding career.

"It's all about playing and playing a lot," he says. "We had to build it from the ground up. We started out and nobody had a clue who we were. So we just played. The best way to get people talking is word-of-mouth. They see your show, and they start talking. That will pay off in the end. That was the theory when I played in clubs. I just kept the same theory. It's not rocket science. You go out and play and people like what you do, and

they are going to come back and bring some friends next time."

Not that he needs to corral concert attendees these days. As the opening act on Rascal Flatts' current tour, which stops at American Airlines Center tonight, he's a rising star benefiting from huge exposure, thanks to the headliners.

An Academy of Country Music trophy for top new male vocalist for 2006 rests on his mantel. *Relentless*, which arrived in stores May 29, has sold about 238,000 copies so far, according to Nielsen SoundScan. "Johnny Cash" sits in *Billboard's* Top 10. So his grass-roots approach seems to be working just fine.

Yet Mr. Aldean almost walked away from music. A recording contract and a publishing deal fizzled around 2000. He married wife Jessica six years ago. His daughter, Keeley, is 4. Feeling the pull of responsibility, he began to apply for jobs around town. Then Broken Bow came calling.

"I've always been focused on trying to get a record deal and get my career off the ground," he says. "So finally I get a record deal, then I get dropped from the label. I backed up and started to reassess things. I got married, had my daughter and got my priorities in order. Then here's the record deal you've been working for so long. It made me appreciate it more. As frustrating as it was, I wouldn't change anything. Once it did happen, it made me want to work harder to hold on to it."