

georgia **MUSIC**

FROM MACON TO MUSIC ROW

**JASON ALDEAN'S
'RELENTLESS' RISE**
by LISA LOVE



Jason Aldean may have hit number one on the country charts, and the Macon native now may be able to boast hit singles and awards, but just a few years ago the singer/guitarist nearly gave it up for a straight job to support his wife and newborn daughter Keeley.

"When I first moved to Nashville, things were going well, and I got offered a record deal right out of the box. I started thinking to myself, 'I should've moved here five years ago if it was this easy,' and then all of a sudden, I got a reality check and I ended up losing my record deal—it wasn't as easy as I thought."

Aldean, 30, spent the next four years knocking on doors. "I went around to all the labels in town playing them songs like 'Why,' which ended up being a number one later, and 'Johnny Cash.' But they just didn't get what I was doing. I got turned down by all those labels, most of them two and three times."

Discouraged by the lack of a contract, Aldean was preparing to move back to Georgia when fate intervened after a gig at Nashville's Wild Horse Saloon. Aldean met Lawrence Mathis, who told him if he'd stay in Nashville one more year, he'd manage him and try to get him a record deal. Aldean said he'd stay six more months. Five weeks later, Mathis secured Aldean an offer from Broken Bow Records.

Flash forward two years to 2007, and Aldean's sophomore album, *Relentless*, released May 29, enters *Billboard's* Country Albums chart at #1 and the Top 200 Albums chart at #4. Selling 90,000 copies in its first week, *Relentless* is the third best country album debut of the year, behind Tim McGraw and Martina McBride. Aldean's "relentless" rise means that proud Maconites will need to make room for an addition to the city's long list of musicians who've gained national and international attention for their work—a list that includes Little Richard, Otis Redding, Bill Berry and Mike Mills of R.E.M., keyboardist Chuck Leavell, violinist Robert McDuffie and The Allman Brothers Band.

"You know, I've always been proud of where I'm from," says Aldean, "and so it feels really good to be a part of that. I mean Georgia is so rich in music history—to be mentioned in the same sentence with those guys—you know, it's just very cool to be able to do that."

HONKY TONK HIGH

Back in the early '90s, however, the 15-year-old Windsor Academy student was performing regularly in the house band at Macon's now-defunct Nashville South nightclub. While many parents might object to a promising young

baseball player spending weekend nights in a honky tonk, Debbie and Barry Aldean, who'd divorced when Jason was three, did not.

"Both my parents were very supportive of what I did," he said. "My dad was a musician; he played guitar and sang." While spending summers with his father in Homestead, Fla., Aldean learned to play guitar. Barry Aldean would draw guitar chords and finger positions on notebook paper for his son before going to work. "He would get home and I'd show him what I'd learned, and then it got to the point where I starting showing him how to play stuff," Jason says.

Back in Macon, his mother landed him his first gig at a local VFW, where, at 14, he sang Tracy Lawrence's "Sticks and Stones" and John Anderson's "Seminole Wind." Performances at regional fairs and talent shows, and eventually Nashville South, followed. By the time Aldean graduated in 1995, he knew that he wanted to pursue a music career instead of college.

"My dad always said, 'If you're good enough and you play enough, somebody will find you.'" Encouraged by the advice, Aldean assembled his own band, the Young Guns, and his father began booking the musicians throughout the Southeast. "We went around and we played a bunch of clubs for free the first time just to prove to them that we could, and that was kind of how it started.

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We just played as much as possible."

While out on the road, Aldean began to write his own songs. In 1998, while performing one of his compositions at The Buckboard in Atlanta, he was approached by Michael Knox, an executive with the Nashville division of Warner/Chappell Music, a publishing company. Knox liked what he heard and signed the 21-year-old, who packed up his belongings and moved to Nashville. A month after arriving, Aldean landed a recording contract. "I think for any new artist trying to get a record deal, Nashville is just one of those places that, for some, it's like going to Disneyland and it's a great experience, and then for others, it can be pretty devastating." With the early success, then the long struggle, Aldean admits he tasted a bit of both.

THE 'IT' FACTOR

Execs at Broken Bow, home of rising country star Craig Morgan, sensed great potential in Aldean as well. "With Jason, everyone at (Broken Bow) saw and felt that 'it' factor," explains Brad Howell, the label's general manager. "Jason had more than songs, or a look, or being able to sing. Somewhere in Jason, we saw those things that you can't teach a young artist. A definitive style, the ability to entertain a crowd of strangers... at the same time, Jason is thick-skinned and confident enough to survive in a very tough music business environment."

Aldean said he had been searching for exactly that kind of enthusiastic support. "I landed with a record label that believed in what I was doing and they were ready to get to work and launch a new artist."

With Michael Knox producing, Aldean put together an album, three songs of which he co-wrote. "Hicktown," penned by Big Kenny, John Rich and Vicky McGehee, was

chosen as the first single and released in April 2005. The song exploded at country radio and the subsequent singles, "Why" and "Amarillo Sky," earned peaks of #1 and #4, respectively. The Academy of Country Music named Aldean Top New Male Vocalist in 2005.

The singer is quick to credit country radio for its role in launching his phenomenal rise. "That's where it starts—if radio is willing to play the music and give people a chance to hear it, that's all you can ask for. At that point, whatever is going to happen is just going to happen—people are going to like it, go buy your record and come see your shows, or they're not and then you won't have a record deal for very long."

RISING FOR AN ENCORE

With Aldean's debut having delivered Broken Bow its first gold album, and as of April, its first platinum album, it's probably safe to say his deal is secure. But with a wildly successful first record comes great expectations for the second among both fans and label. With Knox again on board as producer, Aldean began to search for material. Although he co-wrote three songs on the first record, he knew his newfound status in Nashville would afford him greater access to A-list writers. "The fact that we were able to have some hits off of the first album opened some doors at publishing companies, so it made it a lot easier to go and find great songs," he explained. "We wanted to

make sure we took our time and found the right songs, and I think we were able to do that."

With "Johnny Cash," Aldean mined his own past. The song, written by John Rich, Vicky McGehee and Rodney Clawson, was actually slated for the first album, but the publishing company decided to instead give the song to Tracy Byrd. Byrd included it on a greatest hits album, but it didn't chart as a single. For *Relentless*, Aldean reclaimed the song, which ironically celebrates attitude, defiance and freedom.

When looking for a duet partner for the slow-burner, "Grown Woman," Aldean turned to Miranda Lambert, another platinum-selling young artist. "Miranda was actually my first choice because we had been on tour with her, and we were actually getting on stage every night and singing a song together, so I know that our voices had a good blend."

Other new songs off *Relentless*, including "Who's Kissing You Tonight" and "Do You Wish It Was Me," should get a workout this summer as Aldean joins Rascal Flatts on its "Still Feels Good" arena tour through September. And while thousands of fans attend those concerts all over the country, singing along with every word of "Hicktown," somewhere in Macon there's a townie, pointing out directions to the Otis Redding statue, Rose Hill Cemetery and the nightclub where Jason Aldean used to sing with the house band. **gm**

