

# POW! STAR

*Hotwire*

## JASON ALDEAN

With his win as top new male artist at the Academy of Country Music awards May 23rd, Jason Aldean completed his own personal down-but-not-out story. By 2003,



The 29-year-old was well on his way to being the classic Nashville casualty—one of the countless, faceless candidates tossed aside by a disinterested Music Row.

The Georgian had signed with Capitol Records but a cabinet change at the label knocked him off the roster. He also lost his publishing deal.

"When I met him I was consulting for a film and television company," Aldean's manager, Lawrence Mathis, told *Pollstar*. "I saw him at the Wild Horse one afternoon. He was doing a showcase for a record label that didn't show up, but I was just blown away by it."

In fact, his future agent, Kevin Neal, had seen at least 15 showcases.

"And he never got signed," Neal told *Pollstar*, "which I never understood because he's so good live."

Mathis decided to approach Aldean after this particular showcase and asked the singer if he was being managed.

Aldean threw him a roadblock, telling Mathis he didn't have a manager, but didn't like them anyway.

"I said, 'Well, I really don't either, so we've got something in common,'" Mathis said. "He said, 'Man, look, I really want to go home. I'm losing my publishing deal, it's not looking real good right now. I need to regroup.'"

Aldean also had a mortgage, a car payment and a child to worry about—it was time to go back to Georgia. Mathis convinced him to at least have lunch with him the following Monday, on the house. When Aldean sat down, he gave Mathis a chance to manage him if he could get a new publishing deal or extend the current one and get Aldean signed to a record company within six months.

Mathis took him up on the challenge. They did a couple more showcases and, less than six weeks later, Aldean was signed to Broken Bow Records.

Mathis also took a trip to Buddy Lee Attractions and pitched Aldean to Neal, not knowing there was already a history between the singer and the agent.

"I said, 'Hey man, I found this guy who's really great and wonder if you'd work with me on it. And I knew what that meant,'" Mathis said. "It meant him losing money to do it because I was asking him to basically put everybody else on hold to do this deal. And then I told him who it was."

That's where Neal picks up the story.

"I responded, 'Well, I've known Jason since he was 17 years old.' A friend of mine in Savannah who was actually a tour manager for Luther Vandross and most recently a production manager for Maroon 5 introduced me to Jason and his father, Barry. They came up and I listened and we talked. I said, 'You're just going to have to come up here and try to get some things going.'"

That helped motivate Aldean's migration to Nashville, but it wouldn't take him all the way to the top. Neal said the missing element was a manager that had faith in Aldean, which made Mathis a very important player. When that took place, everything fell into the pocket quickly. And the near-boutique agency Buddy Lee got on the horn to everybody to let them know Aldean's worth, including *Pollstar*.

"That's why I love 'em, that's why I love 'em," Aldean told the magazine prior to his first gig after the ACMs. "They were really early believers in what I was doing and it's been a good fit for me. It's kind of a smaller booking agency, I guess...but you get more attention and they work hard for you. I don't see me going anywhere else."

Aldean was appearing at—what else—a showcase in Fresno, Calif., May 24th, doing battle with the final episode of "American Idol."

His song "Why" was No. 1 on the country charts at the time, and the William Saroyan Theatre was filled with plenty of cowboys and cowgirls not interested in what song Taylor Hicks was singing on the Fox network.

"After this, I'm going to the beach and chill out. I'm not going to do anything for a week. I think it's our only week off until two weeks before Christmas."

Aldean has already wrapped tours with Rascal Flatts and Miranda Lambert, and is heading out for the fairs and festivals. Fair buyer Variety Entertainment was an early believer in Aldean and grabbed about 15 of the dates late November.

[Aldean and Mathis] bought into what I wanted to do, which was have Jason go on the road before a single was ever out to build some key markets," Neal said. "He's one of the rare artists that I've represented that's sacrificed and gone into some markets where there might be 20 people in a club or 50 people."

"I initially sent out a letter to buyers saying I haven't seen this or felt this way about an artist since the first time I saw Garth Brooks—we represented Garth for several years. Aldean has live charisma, and a connection with the fans."

Joe Roberts

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